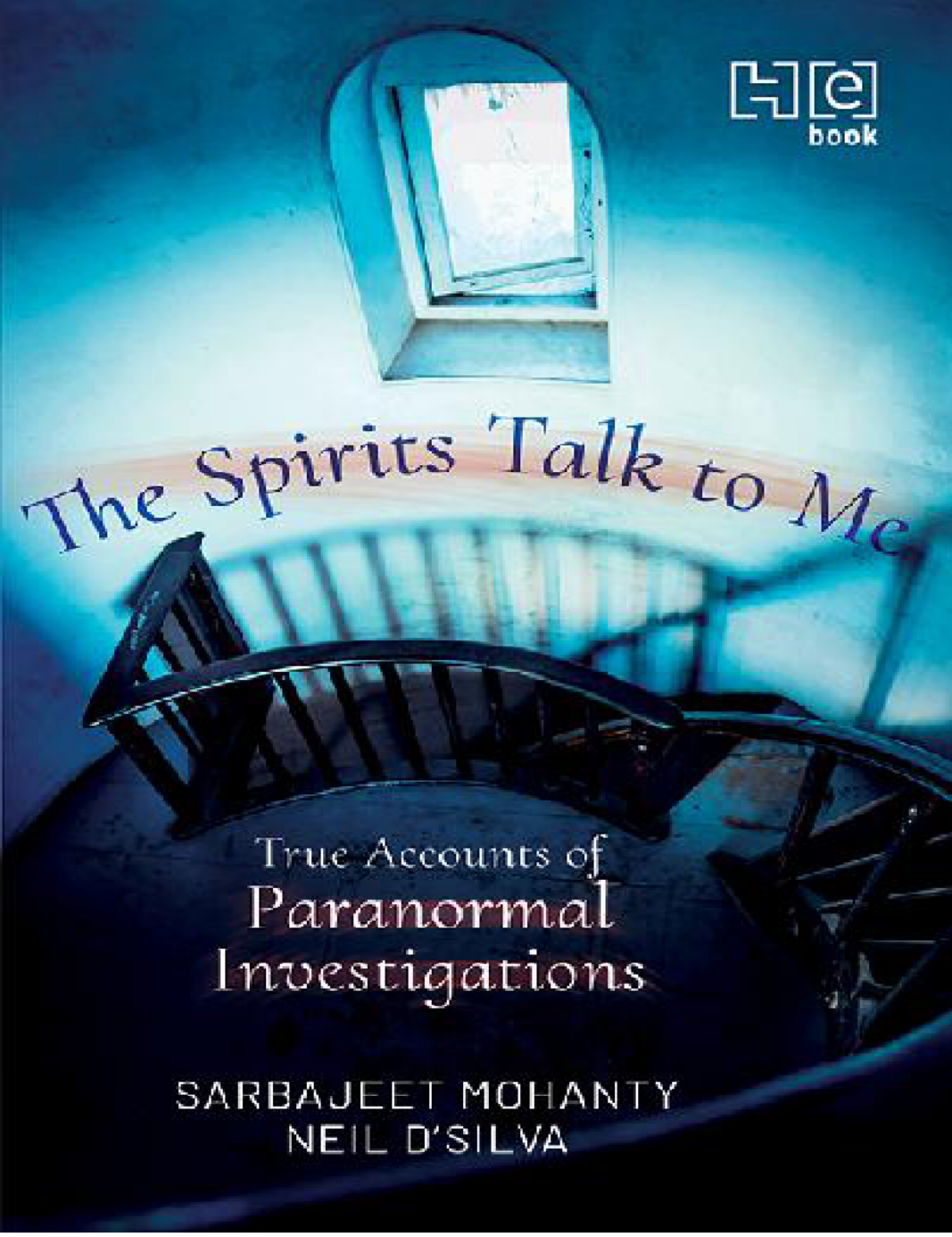
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The Spirits Talk to Me
True Accounts of
Paranormal
Investigations
SARBAJEET MOHANTY
NEIL D'SILVA

# The Spirits Talk to Me

## True Accounts of Paranormal Investigations

SARBAJEET MOHANTY
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*To all the spirits out there who deemed it fit within their grand universal plan to take time out to talk to me*

‘I believe humans have souls, and I believe in the conservation of souls.’

– John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*

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*Acknowledgements*

# INTRODUCTION

DO GHOSTS AND SPIRITS really exist or are they a figment of an overactive imagination? If they are indeed actual entities with a life and will of their own, are they to be found wandering around in our world? If so, why do they choose to trespass instead of confining themselves to their own realm? How do they manifest, and can they actually interact with us?

What is the truth behind stories of haunting? Are they simply an attempt at sensationalism taken to its height as a prank or are they an actual takeover by spirits? Is possession the manifestation of human psychological disorders or is it a condition induced in human beings by trapped spirits of the dead desperately seeking release and, in the process, wreaking havoc on the lives of their chosen victims? Are vengeful ghosts malevolent spirits on a destructive spree or are they wronged souls imprisoned in an unfortunate past from which they are unable to escape?

Then there are the elves and the fairies, the creatures and demons of folklore – the stories passed down generations. Do they belong solely to the realm of myth and fantasy or have they sprung from deeper truths that speak to those swearing by their existence and phenomenal powers?

It was their individual quests to find answers to such intriguing questions that brought Sarbajeet Mohanty from Bhubaneswar and Pooja Vijay from Mumbai, two young people with a keen interest in parapsychological phenomena, together.

Sarbajeet's own story, which features in this book, is an unusual tale of transformation and traces his obsession with the unknown. As a child, growing up in a small town near Bhubaneswar in Odisha, he found himself battling several phobias, the primary one being a morbid fear of the dark. While this is not an uncommon fear in children, in Sarbajeet's case it went on to acquire such an alarming magnitude that, at one point, he even fell ill from the stress it was causing him.

A quiet, sensitive child, Sarbajeet could sense the presence of entities in the dark that were invisible to the average adult. It did not take his parents long to realize that he was different from other children, and they set about looking for ways to help 'normalize' their son, in the hope that he would eventually grow out of his fear. Running parallel to these efforts were Sarbajeet's own attempts to overcome the crippling effects of his phobia.

With time, he came to recognize that his heightened awareness of phenomena beyond the physical realm was a special gift that needed to be appropriately channelled so that its intended purpose could be

fulfilled.

While Sarbajeet was going through his own struggles, Pooja had experienced several unexplained occurrences in her life as well. From early childhood, she had had visions of her past life. There even came a time when she began communicating in a language that was unknown to her family and initially dismissed as gibberish.

Later, as a teenager, she had a dark premonition that her mother would meet with a car accident. When the mishap did take place eleven days later, she was shocked to discover that the details uncannily matched those in her premonition.

Over the years, Pooja developed an uneasy sense of being constantly 'watched' and acknowledges receiving communication from what she now refers to as the 'other side'. Such unexplained phenomena would gradually become commonplace for her. She also realized she could see people's auras and, with a little effort, even probe their past lives.

Sarbajeet and Pooja eventually met on a social media group for paranormal enthusiasts and discovered, to their mutual surprise, that their thoughts on how they could take their individual abilities forward were startlingly similar. The seed for the idea of setting up a formal society to conduct paranormal research and investigation was thus sown.

Accordingly, on 1 September 2016, the two founded the Parapsychology and Investigations Research Society (PAIRS), registered under its parent organization, the Parapsychology Reformative Social Society (PRSS). In the few short years of its existence, PAIRS has evolved and grown into an organization that is much sought-after by those keen on fathoming the mysteries of the unknown.

The duo devoted the next few years to individually honing their special abilities with the right kind of training. Having already acquired a BTech in electrical engineering from Bhubaneswar's SOA University, Sarbajeet went on to become a certified paranormal investigator after completing a course at the Institute of Metaphysical Humanistic Science, Florida. He subsequently trained at Ohio's New Life Ministry Church School, where he was also ordained as a reverend of the church, to become a certified demonologist – the world's youngest, at the age of seventeen.

Pooja, in the meantime, had completed her post-graduation in operations management from the University of Mumbai and become a certified metaphysician, acquiring her training and degree from the Institute of Metaphysical Humanistic Sciences in Florida.

Armed with their respective qualifications and experiences, the two paranormal investigators were now ready to put a concrete plan in place for their newly founded paranormal society. Their one-line mission – to help souls from both worlds – defines the nature of their work today.

PAIRS gained recognition when the team was approached to do a show called, *Mana Ki Na Mana* on a popular Odia TV channel. Comprising fifty episodes and anchored by Sarbajeet and Pooja, it not only served as the ideal medium for sharing their perspectives on a little-known and generally misunderstood subject with a much wider audience but also helped them acquire significant popularity.

Soon, the PAIRS duo was being approached by many to investigate unexplained phenomena in their homes or workplaces. By this time, PAIRS had gathered together a team of several members with similar interests and inclinations as that of its two founders – Sarbajeet and Pooja.

The popularity of PAIRS was boosted by Sarbajeet's tag as the world's youngest certified demonologist, a fact that also helped him bag the show. His initial investigations were lauded for being backed by research and documentation that helped him arrive at simple, scientific, logical explanations that even debunked many false cases of paranormal activity. His initial clients appreciated his candid and friendly approach and genuine interest in assisting with their problems. He was not a mere thrill-seeker with a curiosity for the paranormal, and soon word spread. It was this human factor that became the cornerstone for the future activities of PAIRS. In addition, it soon became known within the paranormal community that he had a unique way of communicating with ghosts and spirits in that he did not shy away from provoking the unseen world.

With her multifarious skills and uncanny ability to pick up the vibrations of a place and sense what lies beyond the merely physical, Pooja has not only become indispensable to the PAIRS team, but is also much in demand as a psychic, paranormal investigator, past-life regression therapist and reiki grandmaster.

In 2017, the PAIRS team was joined by a new member – Savio Furtado, who bills himself as an exorcist and a psychic. Even before joining the PAIRS team, Savio provided psychic counselling and guidance. With his knowledge of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a method of understanding people through their language and behaviour, he became a valuable asset during investigations. His skill helps the team understand clients better, especially to gauge if their claims of hauntings are genuine or not.

Shiva Mohan also joined PAIRS in 2019 as a full-fledged investigator. He had assisted the team with investigations on certain prior occasions. His acumen at understanding the technical aspects of paranormal investigations, including the handling of electronic devices, has made him a crucial component of the team.

In 2018, PAIRS had begun undertaking research on and investing in paranormal equipment used globally by professionals in the field. With

these tools handy, the team was more than ready to delve into real-life cases.

Each case turned out to be a unique lesson for the team. Inevitably, there were the usual number of false alarms and even hoaxes, but the disappointment they caused was offset by the cases that defied all rational explanation. The logic-defying cases were invaluable experiences that helped the team see the parapsychological world in a new light. Some of these investigations and their gripping back stories are featured in this book.

A hallmark of the team's activities today is its distinctive approach in carrying out investigations. Its members are empathetic not only towards their human clients but equally to the entities inhabiting the world beyond, of which they claim to have encountered many. According to Sarbajeet, 'It is just as important to be courageous while stepping into uncharted territory as it is to be respectful towards the entities you encounter there, for while the latter believe it is still their domain, you are far from your own sphere of experience and are exploring untested waters, as it were.'

In fact, the rules of investigation set out by PAIRS are guided by an elaborate protocol on how to communicate with ghosts and spirits, covering every aspect of such interaction from the initial salutation to the final goodbye. There have been times, however, when even conforming to these rules did not yield the desired results and the team found itself in situations of grave peril where the circumstances were beyond its control. Danger is omnipresent when dealing with paranormal phenomena, and unpredictability is part of every investigation. For, as Sarbajeet puts it, every case is unique and like the different kinds of people living in this world, ghosts and spirits too exhibit very dissimilar characteristics and have to be handled accordingly. A single miscalculation could put someone's life at risk.

Today, PAIRS is dedicated to paranormal research and investigation that engages the formidable intelligence and insights of qualified paranormal investigators, parapsychologists, paranormal researchers, demonologists, spiritual healers and counsellors. Dealing in scientific study that involves the investigation of paranormal and psychic phenomena, these highly trained individuals are even exploring the nature of the human mind through intensive research and experiment.

Supporting them in their quest are well-known international paranormal experts, including Allen Tiller (paranormal investigator of the show *Haunting: Australia*), Tim Woolworth (founder of Paranormal Study), Glenn Williams of Baltimore Paranormal Research Group and Jimmy Petonito aka 'Mr Haunted'.

The larger goal of PAIRS is to eradicate the ignorance, blind faith and superstitions that spawn misconceptions about the paranormal in our

world today. By educating the masses through the benefits of its research, the team hopes to dispel irrational fears of the unknown.

Sarbajeet believes there is a reason why he was chosen to be a paranormal investigator, and that he is still in search of that reason. In his words, 'In a world where there are so many professions, why did I choose to be a paranormal investigator? I believe that you do not choose the paranormal world; it chooses you. And if it has marked you, then every path you take is going to lead you deeper into solving its mysteries.'

Pooja acknowledges a similar sentiment, and puts into words the mission and goals of PAIRS. She says, 'The ultimate aim of PAIRS is to help the souls of both worlds, the physical and the spiritual. We don't just help people who come to us seeking help, but we also help the spirits who are stuck and need assistance for their journey into the next realm.'

To this end, PAIRS has been organizing in-person and online events to highlight its activities, including research into allegedly haunted locations. Its flagship event, ScareCon, is billed as Asia's biggest paranormal convention.

Neil D'Silva
2020

# 1

# HOW IT ALL BEGAN

## *Balasore*

WE ALMOST NEVER FORGET the experiences that leave a mark on our impressionable minds during the formative years of childhood. And when those early years are filled with incidents that have left haunting memories, the mark is hard to erase, not least because it has played a significant role in turning us into the people we are today.

I was born in 1997 in Balasore, a town in Odisha, but it wasn't destined to be my permanent address. My father's job in the public-sector with the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) ensured that. As is common with the requirements of public-sector jobs, my father would be transferred from one city to another quite frequently and the entire family would move with him. I remember my early years being punctuated with such migrations. As a result, I never could form enough of an attachment with any one particular place to regard it as home. My memories of childhood, therefore, feature a montage of scattered locations rather than a stable image steeped in nostalgia.

Not that I have any regrets about the migratory life I led as a child. For, my father's transfers took us to the country's entire eastern region – Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh – and even to some of its north-eastern areas. We were, invariably, allotted accommodation in government colonies that had come up in these areas, and these colonies were all located in the prime areas of the cities we lived in and were, without exception, surrounded by vistas of natural beauty. As a child, I did not dwell on such privileges, but when I go back to those places today, I can see how beautiful they were.

Apart from their natural beauty, the eastern states of India are famous for another treasure: their rich folklore. The creative imagination of the local people, even in the remotest areas, is as unbridled as it is unrivalled. All it takes is a few days spent in these regions for their local tales to enthral and captivate you. The ones that truly stand out, of course, are the stories of horror, often passed on from one generation to the next, mostly as cautionary tales to inculcate moral values. Colourful narratives abound of bogeymen, evil witches living in secret, forbidden

places and ghosts that walk by your side when you step out of the house at night, turning more suspenseful and terrifyingly real with each retelling.

So you can imagine my state of mind while growing up, being perpetually fed such stories as a child. They came from members of my own family and from my friends. Especially on moonless, lonely nights, these stories would be staple entertainment as my friends and I gathered in someone's home, and sat huddled together to while away the hours. But often, after these sessions were over and I made my way home alone, my legs would tremble and my steps would falter.

I was about six years old and living in Bhubaneswar when a phobia began taking root within me: the fear of darkness. Darkness of any kind had begun intimidating me; be it a dark alley outside the house or a dark corner in my own room. So acute was this morbid fear that it began to manifest itself physically; I would begin to tremble or break out in a cold sweat.

I was born with a fanciful imagination and the stories I heard put my imagination into overdrive. The curse of a lively mind is that it often lets the imagination run riot. As a result, I would conjure up my own monsters and believe that darkness was their refuge, their lair.

To a great extent, my predicament was worsened by a neighbour of ours, my friend Meet's father. I am not sure what profession this gentleman was engaged in, for he would be at home most of the time. He could have been a writer or a journalist, perhaps, for his room was filled with books, newspapers and magazines of all sorts. Meet's father was usually engrossed in his work, but there were times when he would come out and sit with us boys. There would be other kids from the neighbourhood too and we would all gather around 'Uncle', as we called him, to listen to what he had to say. For there was one thing about him that everyone knew: he had a repertoire of the most fascinating stories anyone had ever heard.

I remember one, in particular, that had a profound impact on me. Uncle had rounded up the kids that evening, as he did on many other occasions, before launching into his tale. The moment he asked, 'Children, have you seen the big peepal tree on the road leading to our house?' a complete hush fell upon us.

Uncle then went on to narrate an experience involving the tree. About fourteen years ago, when he was much younger, he was returning home from work. It was quite late in the night and the road was deserted. He had walked past the tree and moved ahead when he heard a sound behind him. He spun around, only to catch a fleeting glimpse of something red disappearing into the tree.

He was shocked. There had certainly been something standing in front of the tree and the instant Uncle had turned, the entity had entered

the tree and vanished. But this was impossible, because the bark of the tree trunk was whole, intact. There wasn't a hollow visible anywhere. And Uncle was sure he wasn't hallucinating.

The next day, he recounted this incident to an older neighbour who knew the area like the back of his hand.

Having listened carefully to Uncle's account, the old man told him, 'You were saved by the skin of your teeth, lad. That "thing" you saw is the Red Woman. She's the ghost of a woman who died in an accident on this very road because of a reckless passing motorist. Since then, she has held a grudge against all human beings and consumes the soul of whomever she fancies.'

You can imagine my state from that day onwards! I didn't dare step out through the colony gate, for the tree was visible from there. Worse, my bedroom window faced the tree. I urged my mother to reposition my bed so that my gaze wouldn't stray, even by accident, towards the tree; only then did I find some peace.

---

As my fear of the dark took hold, the inevitable questions from my parents followed. Things would come to such a pass that I was reluctant to even go to the bathroom at night, however strong the urge. It was at this point that my mother asked me with some concern if something was amiss. It struck me then that the moment of disclosure had finally arrived, and I could unburden myself.

'But everyone is afraid of the dark, Sarba,' my worldly-wise mother said in her attempt to allay my fears after she had heard me out. 'As children, we all are and then we outgrow that phase. Let me assure you there is nothing to fear about the dark.'

However much I tried to articulate my fears, all I found myself doing was repeating words like 'ghosts', 'spirits' and 'monsters'.

Father, who had been within earshot all this while, but not an active participant in the conversation, decided to jump in.

'What's this I hear about my boy fearing the dark? Aren't there better things in the world to be afraid of? Darkness has never harmed anyone.'

'But Papa…'

'Enough of that stuttering!' Father boomed.

Then he did something that I will never forget for the rest of my life. He took me by the hand and led me briskly to a room in the house that lay in darkness. As we paused at the door of that room for a moment, the knot of terror tightened in my chest as I wondered what my father was about to do. Then he shoved me inside.

'Look!' he said in a stern voice. 'You are in the dark now. What's in there to fear? Is there anything at all?'

I felt the tears of fright rolling down both cheeks. I refused to turn and look at the darkness around me; I looked straight ahead, instead, staring at the corridor that was still bathed in a yellow light. And then when I could hold it in no longer, I let go, soiling myself. The ignominy of that moment made me cry all the harder. Later, I was told that my shrieks and sobs had carried through to the neighbouring houses.

'Take him out of there!' mother cried.

Darting past father, she grasped me by the hand and pulled me out of the room. By then, I was a screaming, trembling, soiled mess.

'Useless!' father roared in disgust. 'All those movies and stories from his worthless friends are doing this to him. Make him stop meeting those good-for-nothings!'

---

After that incident, I took it upon myself to restrict the time I devoted to watching horror shows and movies on television, and even dissuaded my friends from telling me any ghost stories. They ragged me endlessly for being such a 'sissy' and I endured a lot of taunts, but I ignored them. I had arrived at the painful conclusion that I alone could understand what was happening to me.

Even so, the agony I suffered from my fear of the dark did not abate. If anything, it increased manifold and began to infiltrate every moment of my life. Nights would be sheer torture. I would wake up at random moments, typically between 2 a.m. and
4 a.m., and sense all kinds of eerie, invisible activities going on around me. It would feel as though someone was in my room, shuffling around and trying to lay a cold, clammy hand on me. If I locked the door from inside, I would be woken up by what sounded like knocking. I would hear someone tapping on the panes of my bedroom window from outside. On one occasion, I distinctly heard the sounds of utensils being banged about in the kitchen. There was much clanging, and at one point, I even heard the reverberations as a metal utensil hit the floor and rolled away. It was 3.15 a.m. at the time, hardly the moment for someone as overwrought as I was to go and investigate those mysterious noises. I wrapped myself in my blanket as tightly as I could and forcibly kept my eyes shut till they hurt. When I woke up in the morning, everything seemed as usual in the kitchen.

Then one morning, a particular incident placed whatever had been happening to me in a different perspective. We were out on the balcony of our first-floor home – my mother, carrying my year-old sister, Sneha, in her arms, and I standing beside her. We were gazing down at the people passing by in the street below. It was a busy morning like any other, with people of all kinds going about their business. Our eyes were

drawn to an ascetic who was begging for alms. He was quite tall and dressed in saffron attire. Several strings of beads hung around his neck. In his hands, he carried a brass vessel for collecting alms. We watched as he approached from the other end of the street, shouting out his well-practised lines for the women of the houses around us to emerge, seek a blessing from him and offer him alms in return.

Probably trying to avoid eye contact with the hermit, mother turned to go back into the house. Whereupon the man himself came bounding up the street to a spot below our balcony. It was as if he had sensed something all of a sudden and chosen to ignore the four or five other houses along his route so that he could come up and speak to us right away.

Standing below our balcony, he shouted aloud for almost the entire colony to hear, '*Maai, kaala saaya.* Mother, a dark shadow.'

It made mother freeze in her tracks. Sneha began crying; perhaps, the sight of this imposing sadhu was too intimidating for her.

'*Kaala saaya, Maai. Tumhare ghar mein. Niklo. Jaao. Jaao yahaan se.* A dark shadow, mother. In your house. Leave! Go! Go away from here.'

And as we stared at him with bated breath, he added, '*Nahin toh woh tumhara sarvanash kar dega.* Otherwise, it will destroy you.'

With those portentous words, the ascetic turned and left, striding off down the street.

'He…he didn't even ask for his *dakshina*,' mother mumbled.

And, indeed, he had not. Not only had he not asked for alms from our house, he had also forfeited all that he could have received from the other houses on the street. The man was never seen on that street again.

Following that incident, there was a change in mother. I saw her performing pujas all around the house. And there would always be an earthenware lamp on our altar, its flame burning bright. Father, however, seemed unchanged, although I did catch the two of them talking to each other in whispers, lapsing into abrupt silence when I was within earshot.

A few days later, I happened to overhear one of mother's conversations. She was talking to an older woman who would arrive at our doorstep to sell fresh vegetables. As they chatted, they were unaware that I could overhear their conversation from inside the house. My ears pricked up when the vegetable vendor said, 'This wasn't always a residential colony. About twenty years ago, it was an open dumping ground. Right from that peepal tree up to these rows of houses. People would come and discard all kinds of stuff here. Even a corpse was discovered here once.'

'What!' Mother exclaimed. 'A corpse?'

I could see the vegetable seller nodding, her eyes dramatically wide. 'Yes, of a nineteen-year-old unmarried girl who had become pregnant. People say her father killed her because of the shame she had brought to

the family. He chopped her body into small pieces and dumped them here.'

'Okay, that's enough!' Mother said abruptly. 'It's time you left.'

The woman picked up her basket and balanced it gingerly on her head.

'Trust me, madam,' she said. 'If the sadhu baba, that ascetic, has given you any advice, you should abide by it.'

Mother shut the door in her face. I could tell she was shaking inside. Turning away, she saw me and realized I had overheard her conversation with the other woman but remained silent.

---

Father announced not long afterwards that we would be moving to another house, located in the famous steel city of Rourkela. I suspect he had got the transfer arranged, because he did not wish to live in our present home any longer.

No larger than the Bhubaneswar house we had lived in, our new home was, yet again, a two-storey house. It wasn't located in a government colony, though, which confirmed my suspicion that father had requested this transfer himself. If his employers had initiated the transfer, they would have provided free accommodation in some government residential quarters, which father would not have passed on. In any case, we were now
325 km away from the source of my phobias. I was around eight years old by then and had been living for two terrifying years with my private demons. In our new home, I felt that the past could be left behind, and life would start afresh. Given the circumstances, I believe I was the only child ever to be happy with a parent's transfer, even though it meant leaving a familiar school and old friends behind.

Our new home had a spare bedroom which we used for storage purposes. It was cluttered with furniture, books, bundles of clothes and other such articles that were of no immediate use but considered valuable enough not to be discarded. Since hardly anyone ever entered the room, it always lay in darkness. This was where my nightmares would begin all over again.

When I had to pass by the room, my gaze would be drawn to its dark interiors and the darker silhouettes of the objects stored within it. Once again, my imagination began getting the better of me.

About a month later, I had the most frightful nightmare yet. My eyes opened in the middle of the night and I was suddenly wide awake. I could sense that something had roused me. I tried to move then but could not. Terror gripped me when I realized that something heavy was holding me down, pressing down on my chest, paralyzing me

completely. Yet, I could see nothing. I felt as if I had no control over my body, that my limbs were lifeless objects that didn't belong to me any more. Other than my brain, which was on overdrive, no other organ of mine seemed to be functioning. I tried shouting for help, but though I exerted my vocal cords with as much strength as I could muster, they would not obey me either.

At that moment, I felt as if I were dead. I wondered if I had really died and was now merely a soul and the body I was leaving behind was no more than a mass of lifeless organs.

Then suddenly, the enormous pressure on my body eased. I could curl my toes, fold my fingers into my palm. Finally, I could even move my head. I sat up at once, drenched in sweat, having faced the first of many such sleep paralysis episodes in my life.

---

The experience marked the beginning of another kind of torment for me. The fact that we had moved to another house did not matter; my fears had followed me here as well.

I began to dread the darkness when night fell. Nights became, for me, the embodiment of evil. It was the time when all hell broke loose and roamed free on earth. And given my tender age and overwrought imagination, I believed the evil it had unleashed roamed around in my room. Adamant about not sleeping alone in that room, I practically mutinied, refusing to listen to my parents. But father was implacable. He pointed out that I had put up the same kind of 'show', created the same drama in the previous house as well. Without mincing his words, he said it was time I grew up and stopped being a coward.

When I failed to convince my parents that the darkness my room was plunged into after the lights were switched off at night was, in fact, devouring me, I resorted to devious ploys to have my way. One of my 'tricks' was to turn the fan off in my room and bury my head under my pillow. This would make me sweat profusely. I would then call mother and claim to have come down with fever. Seeing me perspire in this manner, she would believe I was running a temperature and stay up all night looking after me. Reassured by her caring presence, I caught up on some much-needed sleep. Today, I feel guilty about having resorted to such a ruse to make her stay up all night, but at that age, I knew no better and could focus on nothing but my own distress.

Of course, such tactics could not be relied on night after night. Most nights, I would shut the door to my room and keep the lights on. This did afford me some respite from my fears and I managed to fall sleep, but it was a disturbed kind of rest and over the weeks, it left me groggy and grumpy when I was at school. This had an adverse impact on my

academic performance and the other activities I was engaged in, such as sports. The outcome was further reprimands from my parents.

A time came when I began to feel utterly dispirited. I lost interest in everything. Even in my waking moments, I would start thinking of the invisible things prowling in my bedroom at night and the shadows that moved in the rooms that lay in the dark. At night, I would imagine what might be going on in the spare room. I was certain I could hear sounds, which sometimes gave me the impression that there were groups of people there, whispering to each other. When my eyes closed from fatigue, I would see a tentacled monster stretching out its arms to reach across and envelop the entire room. They caused me such mental anguish that I sank into a state of depression.

This situation would have continued indefinitely, had something remarkable not happened shortly after my ninth birthday to change the course of events.

---

It came in the form of a bird that someone had gifted us. He was a typical Indian rose-ringed green parakeet, a beautiful male specimen. He was a lovely creature. His animated squawking seemed to enliven our home's rather staid ambience. The bird was quick to mimic us too and became quite comfortable with my sister, who took on the responsibility of feeding him and cleaning his cage. Soon, the bird was able to articulate a few greetings like 'Good morning', 'Hello' and 'Buh-bye' in a stylish English-lady accent, much to the amusement of everyone in the house.

We named the bird Glory. He was so lively that he kept hopping about in his cage all day. This was all very well in the daytime, but at night, we needed to put him elsewhere to curb his raucous enthusiasm and give everyone a chance to rest. The method we devised – and it worked beautifully for several weeks – was to drape a black cloth over the cage and hang it in the spare room. Within its cosy confines, Glory would go to sleep almost immediately and wake up only in the morning.

That the spare room was no longer vacant at night was also a source of some relief for me; there was at least someone in there, even if it was only Glory. But conjuring up images of the parrot braving all those monsters in the dark room would give me the chills. My imagination continued to frighten me.

For several days, everything was fine. Replenished with a full night's sleep, Glory would be his usual screechy self in the morning. Then one night, I was rudely awakened by some kind of disturbance. As soon as I opened my eyes, fear gripped me. The ghosts of my fancy were back. I put my pillow over my face and tried to go back to sleep. But I could not;

some kind of rattling noise kept me awake. I could hear Glory's squawks faintly and that scared me all the more, because it revived my fears of the dark spare room. Perhaps, I told myself, Glory had also woken up and was agitated. I knew I should go and find out if he was all right, but courage failed me. I didn't have the nerve to even take the pillow off my face, let alone enter that scary cavern of darkness to investigate.

Somehow, even as I was silently debating the issue, sleep overcame me. I had probably been exhausted that day. Fatigue managed to overpower my phobia and my concern for our pet parrot.

I woke up to a shrill cry. My eyes opened, and it was broad daylight. Someone was crying and sobbing. I recognized the voice; it was my sister's. I sprang out of bed at once and dashed outside. They were all assembled in the spare room – father, mother and my sister – and they were looking with grave consternation at the cage.

Inside, lying on his back, his tiny red feet crooked and still up in the air, his wings spread out beside him, was Glory. But he was dead and we were gazing at his carcass.

All over the cage and down on the floor below it was a scattering of tiny green feathers. It was evident that something had terrified the bird and he had tried desperately to escape the confines of his cage.

What could have frightened him so greatly?

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The incident involving Glory put a whole new spin on things. My parents tried to figure out how a healthy bird like our pet parrot had died so violently when, according to them, he had been kept in such a safe place. When I tried to tell them about the sounds I had heard in the middle of the night, I was summarily shushed for allowing my overactive imagination to take over again.

The depression that I thought had gone away when we moved to the new house reared its ugly head again. And this time, its grip was so tenacious, it seemed unlikely that I would ever be free of it. At that point in my life, I became aware of a horrifying possibility – was I doomed to live in this state forever? The more deeply I plunged into depression, the more overpowering those negative thoughts became. And they, in turn, intensified my depression. My life seemed to be trapped in a vicious loop from which there didn't seem to be any possibility of escape.

I had reached the age of fourteen when father set about fulfilling his dream of building his own house. It was to be a sprawling mansion built with his life's savings and the city he had chosen for it was Bhubaneswar.

*Bhubaneswar*! We would be moving back to the city where we had lived earlier, and our new home was not far from the colony where our old house had been.

I cannot express in words what a jolt that gave me. This was the final blow to whatever hopes I had nurtured of being safe. Going back to the place that had given birth to my phobias was the worst situation imaginable. And it was with these demoralizing thoughts that I accompanied my family back to Bhubaneswar. My only comfort, to some extent, lay in the fact that I was no longer the eight-year-old I had been then. Perhaps, having grown older by several years would help me overcome my phobias, I told myself dejectedly.

What would happen here is truly the stuff of life-transforming miracles.

Barely a week had passed since we moved into our new home in Bhubaneswar. The house was spacious and a matter of great pride for the family, but I had reason to look at it rather differently. Reluctant, however, to dampen my father's well-deserved sense of achievement, I had to put on a brave face.

But at night, every source of fear in my life would come alive and whirl around in my head like some bad horror movie. I would see it all in my mindscape – that eerie tree which was not far from our first house in Bhubaneswar, that ascetic and his ominous prophecies, the spare room in our previous home in Rourkela, forever plunged in darkness, and the parrot which had died a mysterious death. These were not mere illusions, but things I had actually seen and they convinced me that my fears were real. Fear is all around us. And it smothers us, not letting us escape its claws.

Then one night, I heard a voice that seemed to come to me from the universe itself.

I was in a state of lucid dreaming. I knew I was asleep, but everything around me was so real, it felt as if I were awake, but in another world. I saw myself drifting away somewhere, my feet not touching the ground. There was no sky over my head. There was nothing on either side. I was in a vast, empty space that I would, perhaps, have dismissed as illusory if I had been in a wakeful state.

That was the night of 13 April 2013, the day of Baisakhi. It was the night when the universe itself spoke to me.

As I drifted away, I became aware of a sphere of light shining somewhere in the distance. I was moving fast towards the light, but I also knew that I would never be able to reach it. I was both terrified and fascinated by that light and my journey, though I had absolutely no inkling of where I was.

'Sarbajeet!' a voice called out.

Uncannily, it was my own voice, but deeper. I was sure it had not emerged from my throat.

I turned to look in the direction of the voice; it seemed to come from the light up ahead. But how could it be my own voice?

'You have come a long way and have to travel a much longer distance,' the voice said. 'And in this journey, you cannot make fear your companion. You have two options before you. They are quite obvious, if you open your eyes and will yourself to see them: one, you could surrender to this fear and then succumb to it one day, like most other people do in their lifetime; or two, you could face the fear. You could stand up to it and then try conquering it.'

'How can I conquer my fear?' I found myself asking.

'You have to find that out for yourself. Remember, the solution to all problems is knowledge.'

It was at that moment that I woke up suddenly. My eyes opened, as if something up there had decided that I should sleep no longer. I don't know if it was my inner voice, the voice of the universe or whatever else one would like to label it.

I spent that night sitting up in bed in a meditative pose, contemplating everything that had happened and was happening in my life. I focused on my fear. I addressed my fear, *spoke* to it.

As for my fear of darkness…

Was it really worth so much that I had let it rule my life? By being afraid of it, I had given it the power to control me. That was my mistake, as the voice had said; I and I alone could rectify the situation.

Why was I afraid of the dark? What was in there? What was the genesis of my phobia, the rationale behind it? Did it contain monsters, as I had once imagined? Ghosts? If yes, who *were* these ghosts? What was their nature? Ghosts were meant to be the spirits of dead people; if so, why were they still lingering?

Were they evil? If so, were they so evil that they needed to be annihilated? Or were they simply angry, and needing to be heard? What was their true nature and form? Were they concrete and visible? If yes, could they be seen by just anybody? Why was it that some people had encounters with them, while others, who went forth especially in their quest to see them, had none at all? Were ghosts able to produce sounds, to communicate? Could they alter the environment? Were they capable of passing through solid barriers like doors? Did they have the power to flip switches and play with electrical equipment?

Then a more important questions came up in my mind: why could I hear them and sense their presence, when no one else in the household could? Why was my awareness of them so profoundly developed? Could it be that they were trying to communicate with me, but I was shutting them out because of my baseless fear? Was this a call for me to be more courageous and find out what it was they wanted of me?

No sooner did these questions enter my mind than I opened my eyes. I could see myself in the mirror in front of me and
there was no expression on my face. It was as if my inner being had

understood something that would change the course of my life.

It was 5.05 a.m. It was still very dark outside. I got out of bed and dressed. I did not know what exactly I aimed to do, but I found that I was directing myself. I stepped out of my room and into the main hall. Without making a sound, I opened the front door and let myself out.

The street outside was pitch dark. There were stray dogs around, most of them curled up and fast asleep. Apart from them, there wasn't a soul in sight. The silence was palpable. On other days, this silence would have evoked images of death, but on that day, it seemed an emblem of peace.

I kept walking, undeterred, and for the first time in my life, unafraid. The darkness all around did not leap out to envelop and smother me. I wasn't giving it that power any more; I wasn't even dwelling on it.

I took a turn and there was the tree before me, the tall peepal with its spreading branches. This was where it had all begun, where my fears had germinated and taken root. I looked up at it now and acknowledged how imposing it appeared in the darkness. Its branches, sprawled overhead like a canopy, were grey and gnarled and covered with leaves that rustled due to some unknown force. I was aware of how that tree would have caused me to faint in terror on some other night in the past. But things had changed for me.

Completely unafraid, I stretched out my arm to touch the tree. Taking a deep breath, I placed my palm on its trunk. Then I placed the other one.

Nothing snapped at me. No ghost of a Red Woman jumped out at me. I had found nothing in the tree that I needed to fear.

It was a liberating feeling like no other.

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That was a transformative moment in my life. It was my epiphany, and it would be the inspiration for my calling. When I heard that voice deep inside telling me that the only way to vanquish the fear of the unknown was to recognize it, I resolved not to be afraid of the dark any more. I would, instead, go forth, undaunted, and try to explore its mysteries.

Far away, another person was battling her own challenges in life. Though she lived in Mumbai, Pooja Vijay's situation was quite similar to mine. But instead of suffering from a phobia, she was in depression on account of the visions she saw of people in different states and incarnations. She would have visions of her close relatives and friends in various avatars as they appeared to her in costumes from different eras. She would see them following practices that diverged from those they were faithful to in this life and – what was most harrowing for her – in some cases, she also had premonitions of accidents and even their

deaths.

Like me, Pooja went through a catharsis of her own when she heard the voice inside her exhorting her to do what she must. She had begun to realize by then that she had been gifted with psychic abilities that enabled her to see across dimensions and explore the past lives of people in their different incarnations.

That Pooja's path and mine would cross was inevitable; it was destined. When we finally met and shared our experiences, we were initially surprised and even alarmed at the similarities in our journeys and the strange coincidence that had brought us together. But was it really coincidence? Is there ever anything called chance? Just as the universe had told us what we were meant to do, it was the universe that had conspired to bring us together to explore its mysteries.

Pooja and I went on to found the Parapsychology and Investigations Research Society (PAIRS) on 1 September 2016 in the hope that it would be an organization that would shed light on the darkness that once ruled both our lives, and rules the lives of countless others. It has been nearly vanquished. In our quest to know everything there is to know about it, we are conquering it, bit by bit, every day.

# 2

# FATAL GAMES

*Kolkata, 2018*

ON A JANUARY MORNING in 2018, shortly after the brouhaha of the New Year celebrations had died down, I received an unnerving call on my personal number. The caller identified himself as Inspector Jaideep Das*. I was unsettled by the police officer's grave tone, especially when he asked, 'Can you come down to Kolkata?'

Surely, I told myself, the cop would have concluded from my phone number that I was in Bhubaneswar, 450 km away? Also, why would a police officer be calling me, of all people?

Before I could figure out a way of putting the question to him without giving offence, he explained, 'I got your reference from Tripathi, whose office your team investigated in Patna two months ago.'

Then it hit me. The man was not calling me in my personal capacity. This was a call for the services of PAIRS. Policemen, it seemed, could also be troubled by ghosts!

'What is it, sir?' I asked, relaxing.

'Something strange is happening in the colony we live in,' he said. 'It's in the line of work you do. But I cannot relate everything on the phone. You must come here.'

You *must* come here! Spoken like a true police officer.

The PAIRS team discussed the 'invitation' that evening. This had every sign of being interesting work. Moreover, there had been an undercurrent of genuine anxiety in the cop's voice. The trip would stretch our budget for outstation assignments, but it bore every promise of being an enriching experience. After debating the pros and cons for three hours, we decided to undertake the journey.

Three days later, Pooja, Savio and I were at the police residential colony. It was late afternoon when we checked in with the building security. The colony turned out to be much larger than I had expected. It stood off an arterial road that ran along the outskirts of the city and was enclosed by a compound wall. Within the compound were seven buildings that housed the residences of police officers and their families. To all outward appearances, it looked like the usual residential complex

for middle-income families, with the typical signs of urban life – clothes hung out to dry from balcony windows, four-wheelers, bikes and bicycles open-parked in front of the buildings, scores of children playing happily in the compound, elderly people sitting and chatting contentedly on the garden benches.

We looked at each other, wondering if we had come to the right place; everything looked as normal as normal can be.

Five minutes later, we were joined by Inspector Das. He ushered us into a room, which turned out to be the building society's office. There, we were joined by two more policemen, also residents of the colony. Over cups of masala chai and cashew cookies, they slowly led us through the events that had been rocking the tranquillity of this idyllic colony for the past several months.

'Mr Mohanty,' Inspector Das began, 'do hear me out patiently. This kind of thing has never happened before and honestly, we are unable to come to terms with it.'

Consternation was visible on his face as he uttered these words.

I tried to put him at ease. 'Please feel free to talk to us, sir. We shall maintain the strictest confidentiality,' I assured him.

Although the weather was quite cold in January, Das was perspiring. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he said, 'So, here it is, then.' He opened a file on the desk in front of him and turned it around so that I could examine its contents. 'Look at these pictures,' he urged.

At first glance, I thought they were photos from a criminal case under their purview. They focused on arms, legs, backs and other areas of the human body; all had bruises on them. These were, by no means, superficial injuries, but had been inflicted with some blunt, heavy object. I realized, then, to my horror, that the subjects of these pictures were children.

'These are our children,' the inspector explained, a hint of emotion breaking through the experience-hardened expression in his eyes. 'This has been happening to them over the past couple of months and we have no clue as to who the culprit is.'

The inspector closed the file, as though he could not bear to look at its contents any more. 'And it's not just our children,' he added in a despondent voice. 'It's us too.'

One of the constables in the cabin then lifted his shirt to reveal a ghastly scar that ran from chest to navel. It looked like the kind of scar left by a botched surgery.

'How do these scars appear?' I asked.

The inspector sighed deeply and said, 'There is an old, abandoned house at the northwest end of this compound. It is in a shambles, but still standing. The trouble began when our children started complaining about hearing strange voices from the house. Children being children,

they would enter the house to play and explore it. There is nothing more tempting for them than an empty house where they can have free rein, you see.

'At first, we ignored their complaints. But a few days later, my son, Palash, reported that he had heard a bull snorting when he went inside the house to retrieve his ball. It had obviously scared the hell out of him. That was when I set off to find out what was going on in there.

'There was no bull anywhere, but the next day, there was this lash mark on Palash's leg, as if he had been whipped with a belt. Soon, other children started coming to us with their accounts of what they had heard in the house. Some had heard elephants trumpeting. Others had heard tigers growling. And one even claimed to have heard an alligator. That was probably just a
kid's fancy. Even *I* don't know what an alligator sounds like! But all the children, without exception, bore these bruises on their bodies.'

'How did all of you react?' I asked.

'When the complaints increased in number, we forbade our children from playing near the house. But then other things started happening.'

'Such as?'

'When the children would not stop complaining, some of us adults went into the house to investigate. I did too. We didn't notice anything out of the ordinary for a while, but as we were turning to leave, we began hearing these noises which were not really the calls of animals, but human voices.'

'Human voices?'

'Yes. Loud roaring and cheering.'

'Who heard it?'

'I did. And so did these two constables here, Sudeep and Parful. It wasn't a continuous, uninterrupted sound, but something like a bad phone reception in stormy weather. You see what I mean? You had to strain to hear it. We all thought we had heard it. And then there was this loud ripping sound. Like…like…'

'Go on…'

'Like flesh being ripped from the bone.' He made a gesture, then grimaced to demonstrate what he meant.

'Wow!' I interjected. 'You really heard that?'

'It was like being at the butcher's.'

'All right,' I said, having digested the information. 'It all sounds quite gruesome. Can we see this house?'

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By the time we reached the place, it was nearing 6.30 p.m. Dusk was about to set in. Had we come a little later, darkness would have devoured

the house.

It turned out to be an ancient structure and every bit as dilapidated as described. No date of construction was mentioned anywhere, however, and even the cops didn't know much about it. Along the length of its wide façade ran a verandah, with four doors in a row opening into it. The sloping roof, with most of its shingles broken, was supported by four stout but worn-out pillars. A profusion of overgrown shrubbery surrounded the house, making it difficult to approach it. The vegetation had invaded its interiors as well and the floor lay thickly littered with a carpet of dry leaves.

At this point, we requested the policemen to leave us alone to explore the house. They had expected to witness us conducting the investigation, but I explained to them that we functioned better when left alone.

As we stood by the entrance of the house, I turned my attention to Pooja. She had already begun studying the house.

'What do you think?' I asked her. 'What kind of house is this? Is it safe to enter?'

Pooja walked a couple of steps ahead of us. She crossed the corridor and went in through the second door on the left. Inhaling deeply, as if trying to get a whiff of some odour, she said, without turning to look at me, 'There is something odd here. We'll know what it is only when we're inside.'

All three of us entered the house through that door.

Beyond it lay a small room. The room was completely bare, and the paint on the walls had peeled off in patches to reveal the old brickwork. The walls had scratch marks all over. I switched on my flashlight and trained the beam on it; the marks had been made by fingernails. They reminded me of the kind of marks I had once seen on the walls of a prison cell made by inmates driven to the brink of lunacy. I chose not to pay attention to these fingernail marks on the old walls. I knew that children frequented the house for their games; the marks could just as easily have been made by them.

I tried to figure out, instead, what purpose this tiny room could have served. With that thought playing on my mind, I reached the other end of the room where there was another door.

It opened with a creak, and then we saw something we hadn't expected at all – a balcony ledge. It ran along the entire inner structure of the house. We were now standing on that ledge and I realized that if we walked along it, we could go all the way around the house from the inside and come right back to the same spot. At the far end of the balcony were more rooms. But the most surprising feature was a square pit in the middle of the floor right below us.

Though now in a dilapidated state, it was a perfectly square man-made pit. And since we were on the ground floor of the house, the pit

was set at least 10 feet below ground level.

I glanced at Pooja again. She was grasping her head tightly between both hands and though her eyes were closed, a tear had escaped from below her shut eyelid and slid down her cheek.

'What is it?' I asked her.

'Shh… I'm trying to see something,' she said, cutting me short.

We waited. For several minutes, Pooja held her head and stood there. Then she waved us off with a frantic gesture. It was an indication for us to leave her alone and go ahead with the investigation.

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The base of the square pit in the middle of the house was made of red stone and the walls that enclosed it bore dark brown stains, the kind left on walls across the city's public areas by uncaring paan eaters with a habit of spitting here and there. The stains certainly did not look recent.

But what, I wondered, was the purpose of the pit? Could it be a swimming pool that had long dried up? Or some kind of community bath house? A place to store things? An area designated for gatherings or, if one went by the paan stains, simply some kind of mediaeval banquet hall where rowdy revellers had gathered in a bygone era? Whatever it was, the pit seemed to have been a prominent feature of the house.

Standing on the balcony ledge, I tried to get a feel of the house. There were no light fixtures or any sign of modern amenities. If there had been, they had obviously been removed.

I continued my exploration along the length of the balcony, with Savio following on my heels. Turning a corner, I came up to the rooms to the left of the main door.

And it was here that we felt for the first time that something was, indeed, peculiar about the place…

Standing outside one of these rooms, the second one, to be precise, I clearly heard someone whistle. It was a short, sharp sound, the kind of whistle we had tried to produce as kids for our own entertainment by thrusting two fingers between the lips and blowing through them.

I turned sharply towards Savio, who was behind me, wondering if it was he who had whistled. But I realized he wasn't even looking in my direction. He was leaning into the room next to the one where I stood and there was an odd look in his eyes that I recognized instantly – he was experiencing something he couldn't quite explain.

'What is it?' I asked him.

He beckoned to me.

I walked the four steps that separated us and peered inside the room that had caught his attention, trying to follow his gaze. Squinting into

the darkness, I asked, 'What is it that you see?'

'There's someone in here,' he whispered.

He made to move into the room, but I held him back immediately.

'Don't,' I warned and switched on my flashlight.

Its beam focused on the farthest wall. I moved the light across the room in a slow, steady motion, while Savio started the DSLR camera to capture its trajectory. The beam of light swept over the room from one end to the other.

'What did you see?' I repeated.

'I heard footsteps very clearly,' Savio said.

'There's no one there now.'

We walked farther, keeping close to each other. Instinct told me that the house was going to be quite a challenge for the team. There was something here – the shadow of death, perhaps? – that permeated every corner. These walls weren't silent. They had a story to tell; and I had to devise a way to hear it. I felt it in my bones that it wasn't going to be a happy story.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my back and spun around. It was Pooja, her eyes bloodshot, as if she hadn't slept for a week.

'I know what this place was used for,' she gasped out, obviously agitated, 'and it is horrible.'

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We interrupted the investigation and went directly to the building society's office where we had met the inspector. The policemen were all still there, absorbed in a discussion that was cut short midway when they saw us.

'Sir,' I said, addressing Das, 'you will have to tell us what used to happen in that house in the past – if it was, indeed, a home or served some other purpose altogether.'

The inspector pierced us with an intimidating stare, quite befitting his position and stature. 'How much do you know?' he countered.

'Not much,' I admitted. 'Pooja is a psychic. She can see things that are not visible to others. But we will need complete information from you. Without it, this investigation is quite meaningless.'

'What did she see?'

Pooja stepped forward. '*See* is not the right word,' she clarified. 'I have a sense of these things, which goes beyond sight.'

'Well, then, what did you sense?'

'The presence of a great many people. The grunting and roars of animals. Lots of noise and chaos. As if some big event was being held there. Sounds of people and animals fighting and…'

As Pooja described her visions, the three policemen exchanged

glances. For several moments, there was an expression of utter bewilderment on their faces.

'Okay, I get it,' the inspector said. 'We were hoping we could get the place cleansed by you without mentioning its gruesome past, but you people are really good at your job. Aren't they, Sudeep?'

The other policeman agreed. 'I'll be damned!' he said. 'How did they know?'

'What was it, sir?' I asked. 'Tell us what used to happen there.'

'About eighty years ago,' Das began, 'when the zamindari system still prevailed in the country, the house was owned by the wealthy and influential landowner of this town. It wasn't his home, but served as a kind of arena.'

'An arena?'

'Yes. Where sports of an unusual kind were organized for entertainment. Animals were pitted against each other.'

'What kinds of animals?'

'All kinds. Lions, tigers, bears, elephants, apes…'

'That's why we heard animal calls in that place,' I observed. 'Their residual energies there are quite strong. Those fights were fights unto death.'

'But what about the human spirits?' Savio persisted. 'I swear I heard the footsteps of people.'

'And I clearly heard a whistle,' I added. 'Didn't you also mention human voices earlier?'

The inspector looked at us and frowned. 'Okay,' he said, 'in the spirit of full disclosure, I must tell you, then. It was not just wild beasts that were pitted against each other.'

'Then?'

'Sometimes, people were also made to fight the animals,' the inspector said despondently. 'Poor local farmers and their family members, who could not pay their taxes, were forcibly taken to the arena to face off against lions and tigers and cheetahs.'

'Oh my god!' Pooja exclaimed.

'Hundreds of people have been brutally ripped apart in that place,' Das elaborated. 'It was not a home, you understand? It was an arena. An arena soaked with the blood of many innocents.'

Pieces of the puzzle suddenly fell into place. Those stains I had noticed at the bottom of the deep pit weren't paan stains at all. They were stains from human and animal blood, smeared and faded over the ages.

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The fear of what lay in store had intensified. We entered the house on

unsteady legs, the thought of what had happened there decades ago weighing on our minds. The pit had been an arena for fatal games. The sinister reality of the blood-soaked sport had got to me and I found myself sinking into despair.

Recalling the photos of the cruel scars inflicted on the bodies of those unfortunate children from the colony, it was clear to me that the ancient entities that walked these halls were filled with malevolence.

Pooja, Savio and I went to the balcony again, making our way to the same spot where Savio had seen the apparition in the room. That was as good a vantage point as any; from there, we could survey the entire spread of the arena below, as well as the rest of the balcony that ran along the interior walls of the house.

It was close to 9 p.m. now. The lights from the houses of the residential colony provided the only illumination.

The three of us stood absolutely still, utterly silent. But in that silence was a growing sense of dread that something unpleasant was about to unfold.

It began with Pooja turning sharply to look to her right. 'I can feel something,' she whispered. 'Right behind me…my shoulders.'

I could not feel it, however. With her eyes, Pooja indicated that I should look at the space above her shoulders. She had apparently sensed something there, something ominous. But all I saw was empty space.

Keeping my gaze on the space behind Pooja, I spoke these words distinctly: 'Hello, there. We come as friends. We have sensed your presence here. Will you talk to us?'

As I spoke, I rummaged in my backpack and took out an EVP recorder. For the uninitiated, EVP stands for Electronic Voice Phenomena. An EVP recorder is a hand-held device, which is basically an audio recorder with a range of frequencies, some of which are in zones that are inaudible to humans. Discarnate entities can produce sounds that the human ear might not pick up, but the EVP recorder can receive and record them. Holding it aloft, I led the team to the areas of the house we hadn't as yet explored. This was an appropriate time to use the recorder, as dinner was over in the residential colony nearby and the sounds of activity there had mostly settled into silence.

For about half an hour, I probed various corners of the old house with the recorder. My auditory sense could detect nothing out of the ordinary, but I kept on at it, recording sound vibrations, if any, in all the rooms.

We finally reassembled at the spot on the balcony where we had started.

'Okay,' I said, 'I am going to play the recording now. Let's see if we got anything.'

Huddling around the recorder, we played it back. There were the

usual ambient nocturnal sounds and the weird, indecipherable noises that all houses, inhabited or not, are known to make in the dead of night. Played back at full volume in that empty house, bouncing off its dilapidated walls, these sounds too raised the hair on the back of our necks. And then, a few minutes into the playback, there was something that made us jump. I immediately looped the recording and played it again, this time at full volume.

There it was again – a human scream, starting at a low pitch, rising to an unnaturally high one and then fading away into the background nocturnal sounds.

'Did we hear anything like this earlier?' I asked.

'No, there was nothing before,' said Pooja.

'It's a woman's scream,' I observed.

I did not complete the rest of the sentence – that it had sounded like the scream of a woman who was in the grip of death, the kind of scream that is wrenched out of the throat when something sharp is plunged into the chest with fatal consequences.

I took up my position again and addressed the entity. 'Lady, we can hear you,' I said. 'It looks like you are in need of help. You can tell us what you need.'

I knew this would elicit no response, but if there was anything out there, the best bet was to engage it in conversation. The reaction that followed shocked us out of our wits.

The three of us were standing on the ledge of the balcony that overlooked the arena below, Savio being closest to the edge. My attention was focused to the front when Savio suddenly screamed as if he were being attacked. I had scarcely turned to look at him when I saw him slipping off the ledge, right into the arena below, a straight drop of several feet. He hit the ground below with a thud.

'Oh my god!' I yelled out, my voice echoing in the hall. 'Savio, are you all right?'

For a moment, he lay sprawled on the ground, immobile. Then he slowly raised his hand and gestured a thumbs up to indicate that he was in one piece. But the reassurance I felt at seeing that gesture was nullified by his grimace of pain.

'How did you fall?' I asked, breathless now.

Pain or, perhaps, the embarrassment at having fallen into the pit made it difficult for him to respond.

Pooja ran downstairs. She examined Savio briefly and said, 'He looks all right.'

All of it had happened without warning. I checked the ledge to see if there were any telltale signs – mould or a loose tile – that might have caused the fall. There was nothing.

Then Savio spoke. 'I got the feeling that someone had pushed me.'

I think that was the moment when my scepticism and anger turned to rage. In my line of work, being respectful to unseen spiritual entities is vital, but at the same time, you must never reveal your fear of them. Fear is a magnet for negativity to latch on to you and anger is an effective mask for concealing fear.

Summoning all my courage, I shouted, 'You there, whoever you are, you have played enough games with us! I will not allow you to hurt my people. What do you want? Do you want me to step into the arena and fight you?'

There was another crash from the far end of the arena that lay in darkness. I turned my flashlight in that direction. I was not surprised, this time, to find that there was nothing there. But that sound could very well have been a response.

'What's going on here?' Pooja asked. 'Such a thing has never happened before!'

'Let's leave, man!' Savio exclaimed. 'This place is giving me the creeps.'

But I wasn't listening to them. 'What do you want?' I repeated to the invisible presence. 'Why are you still here?'

At that question, Pooja, who was now standing in the middle of the arena, looked all around her. She swept her gaze from one corner of the arena to the other and turned around to scan the surroundings. Then she let out a shudder.

'Do you see something?' I asked.

'It's not just one,' she said. 'This is dangerous, Sarbajeet.'

'What do you mean?'

'I can feel them,' she said. 'The negative vibes are quite strong. There are many of them, still trapped in this dimension. Lurking around, as if looking for something.'

'Let's go, man!' Savio repeated.

Now, Savio is not the kind of person to bail out in tough situations. If he was insisting that we leave, something had affected him deeply.

'Are you hurt?' I asked him.

'No. I'm all right now,' he said.

'Can you try to stand?'

He raised himself slowly off the ground and tried to see if he was able to bear his weight.

'It doesn't hurt,' he announced, relieved.

'That's great,' I said. 'Since you both have a bad feeling about this place, I don't think we should pursue the investigation for much longer. I'll think of something to tell the cops. I do feel sorry for the poor children who are being hurt. Wish I could do something but…'

To be honest, the case had taken the wind out of my sails.

If it were merely a paranormal investigation, I wouldn't have minded giving up on it and would easily have moved out of the place. But this

was more than that. There were innocent children involved.

When these bleak thoughts were playing on my mind, an idea occurred to me that made me feel more optimistic.

'What is it?' asked Pooja, sensing the change in my mood.

I said, 'I read somewhere of a unique experiment conducted by some German paranormal investigators. The venue they were exploring was an abandoned circus with a strange history like this one and there was an obstinate poltergeist creating a ruckus every night. Every night, it would cause a lot of harm to people who stumbled upon its domain. The poltergeist was the spirit of the circus freak. I think she had been the circus's bearded lady. The circus was the only place where she had been accorded some respect in her life, but it was also the cause of her death. A freak accident during a motorcycle performance had killed her.

'So the unconventional method employed by the investigators was to duplicate the conditions of the circus. They called the clowns, gathered some audience members and even organized a couple of performances at the same spot. The motorcycle performance was to be the grand finale. And when that ended, believe me, all their devices returned to normal readings. The entity was never seen again after that night.'

'So what happened?' Pooja asked.

'It is open to interpretation. What I think is this: a motorcycle was what had caused the freak's death. When the same conditions, including the applause, the animal calls and even sound of the motorcycle – the phut-phut-phut – were reproduced, they triggered the memory of her death. It either scared her enough to leave the place or she was just content and left.'

'What do you say?' Pooja looked at Savio. 'Sounds quite outrageous, but we can give it a shot. You game?'

Savio shrugged. 'If you two are ready, let's try it out. I'm game.'

And thus began one of the most bizarre paranormal 'investigations' of our career.

---

We went out and told the policemen what we were planning to do. Their reaction was quite unexpected. I had thought they'd ridicule us at the very least, but they proved to be good sports.

Despite it being near midnight, Inspector Das said, 'Well, it sounds like fun, a different kind of entertainment! Should we get our families as audience?'

I was relieved to see that he was comfortable with the idea. He did not know, however, that such an experiment could take a turn for the worse.

I told him, 'I am glad that you are taking it so sportingly. But I'd prefer your wives and children not to get involved in this. We don't need too

many people around us. Just the three of you and we three should be enough. We will set up the other effects, like the sounds and such with our laptops.'

'Done!'

'Please meet us in ten minutes at the house.'

With that, we rushed back to the house and started setting up our equipment. This was Savio's domain. Within minutes, he had the laptops set up, with the appropriate sounds downloaded and ready to be played. A motion sensor camera was set up just outside the arena.

The policemen came striding in as if they were on one of their patrolling rounds.

'What are we expected to do?' Das asked, surveying the equipment we had set up.

'Will we get to see ghosts?' constable Parful asked.

'You might!' I said with a cheeky grin.

Part of the fun was that I was smack in the middle of one of the most exciting paranormal experiments in my career; and the rest of it was my delight at being able to issue instructions to policemen.

'Please sit down on the balcony ledge,' I said. 'I guess that was where the audience used to sit when the fights happened.'

'What are we to do?' Savio asked.

'You guys take care of the equipment,' I said. 'Don't miss a blink's worth. It'd be a shame to have something happen and not record it.'

'And what are you going to do?' Pooja asked.

'I have to take centre stage,' I said, walking up to the middle of the arena as Pooja and Savio looked at me, horrified. 'I am the one in the fight tonight. We cannot duplicate these conditions accurately if there is no one to fight.'

'Do you know what you are doing?' Pooja asked anxiously. 'There's no need to play hero.'

'Hero?' I repeated, taking my position in the middle of the arena and looking all around to get a feel of the dank, damp walls all around. Once more, my gaze fell on the bloodstains and I felt the clawing sensation of fear. Then I shrugged it off. It was no use getting worked up. 'I am being no hero,' I called out. 'I am the bait. Reel me in the moment the going gets tough.'

I turned around to see Pooja and Savio giving me a thumbs-up. Behind them, sitting on those ledges, the policemen looked on intently, as if a grand show was about to unfold.

'Start, Savio,' I signalled.

I shut my eyes and drew in a deep breath. I was ready. Ahead of me now was the farthest wall of the arena, the one with the most prominent bloodstains. In the middle of the wall was a small tunnel through which the animals and human captives used to be driven into the arena. An

earlier investigation had shown us a row of cages there, one of them large enough to hold an elephant, but devoid of any light or ventilation. It was as if those who had devised such 'entertainment' were bent on driving the animals into a frenzy before bringing them into the arena so that the bouts would be more ferocious.

I was facing that tunnel now. All I could see, though, was a black hole, given the feeble illumination that Savio had managed with a few flashlights.

The sounds began to play. The hall was filled with the roars and grunts of animals, amplified by a Bluetooth speaker that reverberated through its confines. In my heightened mental state, the sounds were a cacophony. Would it have been any different eighty years ago, when this place was used for elaborately planned torture devised for human entertainment?

I stood there in the middle of the arena for about five minutes, without a piece of electronic equipment on me, my eyes fixed steadily on the tunnel, completely oblivious to what was going on behind me, ready for the death match that awaited.

And then, I challenged, 'Come on! Which of you is there? Which beast is going to face me tonight? I am right here…'

With my peripheral vision, I sensed a movement to my right. A lurking shadow, as Pooja had described.

I turned my head a few degrees to the right. Whatever was there had vanished, if it had been there at all. I quickly turned back again and immersed myself in the sounds that were being played.

'Come on, come on!' I said. 'Beast or human, have your last fight tonight. Come on!'

Something else stirred this time. This time, it was in the tunnel. It was pitch dark in there, but despite that, I sensed something moving. An obscure shape made of nothing but air. I moved two paces ahead.

'See, I am unarmed, the way you like your prey. This final fight will set all the dead free. A match to end all matches.'

And then I heard a loud roar. It was the sound of people, hundreds of them, and they were shouting and laughing and cheering and applauding. I heard someone shout, 'Finish him!' and someone else cry out, 'He's dead meat!'

A twisted smile appeared on my face. Savio did know how to find the right audio files, I told myself.

All of a sudden, the lights came on. Savio had earlier asked the policemen for more lights. The entire arena was flooded with a yellow glow now and the mouth of the tunnel shone threateningly. I could not take my eyes off that spot.

'Come on, come on, come on…' I breathed, moving ahead ever so slowly.

And then, I stopped.

The thing was headed out of the tunnel now. I could see it. As tall as me but moving on four legs. I could see that it had the shape of a beast!

'Record this, Savio! Fucking record this!' I shouted, without turning, not wanting to miss a moment of the action.

The dark entity advanced. And that was when my excitement turned into acute anxiety. Despite its featureless presence, I knew its gaze was riveted on me, its prey. Would it attack? Can spirits attack the way living creatures can? I'd find out, if my courage didn't fail me.

Though my legs were shaking, I stood my ground.

The thing moved again. Another inch, sniffing the environment, just like it might have when it was alive. It was uncanny how the roar of the crowd had increased behind me. The cheering had reached a fever pitch. There was clapping, chest-thumping, thigh-slapping and a lot of chants filled with abuses.

Then it charged, in a wild, ground-shaking run. I screamed, realizing it was heading straight for me. In another second, I'd know if the ghost of an animal could kill a living human being…

I inhaled deeply, preparing for the impact…but it didn't happen.

Seconds passed. But I did not feel a thing. Then I heard the sounds of piercing and clawing and ripping. The furious sounds of an attack by a predator. I turned to my immediate right and what I saw made me freeze…

There was another spirit there, that of the woman we had been sensing all along. The beast was upon her now and she lay limp and impaled by it, as bits of her were ripped apart by the animal in its feral fury.

Almost as if on cue, a loud swell of applause rose from the crowd.

The game was over.

The beast had been fed.

But was it?

While it was tearing the phantom woman apart, I had stood motionless, observing the beast's every move. Then, something changed. The woman was gone, but the beast was still there. And it was again looking at me.

I realized that the game was still on.

With a lurch, the beast now lumbered towards me. It was just a few feet away and in one leap, it would be upon me.

I breathed hard. There was no escape now.

And then, it leaped.

I did not know how many minutes had passed.

Everyone was around me now – Pooja, Savio and the cops. They were gazing down at me as I lay on the ground. I was instantly aware of that feeling of being smothered, of utter helplessness, the brutal assault on my body, the tearing apart of my skin. I sat up immediately. I looked at myself. I was whole, unharmed.

'What happened? What happened to me?' I asked.

'You just collapsed,' Pooja said.

'Did you see the spirit of the woman? The spirit of the beast? Did you record it all, Savio?'

'What are you talking about?' he asked.

'You didn't? Don't tell me you didn't… Where are the lights?'

'What lights?'

'The place was flooded with lights just now. And the sounds of hundreds of people that you played on your laptop…'

'There was nothing, Sarbajeet,' Savio said. 'These two flashlights were all the illumination we had and all the sounds I played were some random animal roars.'

'Sarbajeet,' Pooja said, 'I don't know what you saw. All we saw was you standing here, then saying something aloud, looking here and there with a very shocked expression and finally falling to the ground and struggling like a fish pulled out of water.'

'You saw no spirits?'

They shook their heads.

I was suddenly aware of the policemen looking down at me, their mouths agape. They probably thought I was a madman.

'I think…I think this investigation is over,' I said.

Without another word, we walked out of the house.

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Two months later, we had a chance to visit Kolkata again. We decided to check on the police colony and found ourselves sitting in the same office, sipping masala chai and nibbling on cashew cookies. Inspector Das was there, and he was smiling.

'We don't know what happened that night,' he said, 'and we haven't told a soul about the exact details of the whole bizarre experience. But whatever it was, it worked,' he said.

I could not contain my excitement. 'It did?'

'Yes. Of course, we didn't know right away. For several days, we continued to think we had made a mistake by calling you guys in, and we actually thought you were all mad. Personally, I still think you are a little crazy. But truth be told, there have been no further complaints about that house.'

'Really?' I said. 'You don't know how happy that makes us. What we undertook that night was an experiment and I didn't know if it would work at all…'

'Ah, don't remind me of that weird night,' said the inspector, looking at his constables. 'We have seen enough kooky stuff in our careers, but nothing as whack as what you did.'

They shared a hearty laugh. Then his tone turned serious again and he said, 'I need to tell you one thing, Mr Mohanty. Please don't reveal our names to anyone, okay? You can talk about us, but it would be unwise to disclose our identities.'

'We won't, sir,' I assured him. 'As I said before, we maintain the strictest confidentiality.'

'Great!' he said, relaxing visibly. 'And now, we have something for you. When the children of our society knew you were coming, they wanted to meet you. They don't know what exactly you did, but they know you are ghostbusters! They are here, waiting to greet you.'

The next minute, about ten children walked into the room. They came wearing gleeful smiles and were armed with tons of questions. Pooja, Savio and I had our first experience of being mobbed. They even had handmade cards for us, where we were depicted as fighting ghosts and spirits! And when some of them told us they wanted to be paranormal investigators like us too, we could not help but feel proud.

The entire episode ended on a high note, with a group picture of us with the children. The smiles on all our faces was proof of the good outcome of one of the strangest investigations of our careers.

# 3

# POSSESSED

*Vadodara, 2018*

IT WAS EVIDENT THAT the simple mud path we had taken was rarely used by people, for goats and other animals strayed freely on to it. In fact, at one point, we had to shoo the animals off to make way for us. But it was the only access road leading from the spot where we had parked our vehicle to the isolated cottage in a village on the outskirts of Vadodara, Gujarat.

The Prajapati house was easy enough to locate, however, in that somewhat remote part of the village; it was the only dwelling there, with not even a small hut visible nearby to disturb its solitude. As described to me over the phone, the house stood in the middle of sprawling fields.

Since there was no one to receive us at the gate, we pushed it open and went in. A verandah ran all the way around the house. The place bore every sign – including the mandatory tulsi plant in the courtyard – of being the residence of a devout Hindu family. There was even a cow reposing in a shed just outside the house. As we entered, the bovine looked at us with world-weary eyes and went on chewing the cud.

Hearing the gate creak open, a diminutive man had come out to greet us. His family followed close behind him. With effusive outpourings of gratitude, he led us to the veranda and offered us a couple of cots to sit on.

As soon as the tea, served in little earthen *kulhads*, came in, the man began, 'As I had explained to you over the phone, this is about my daughter, Ankita. There is something seriously wrong with her.'

This, then, was Mr Prajapati, head of the Gujarati household of ten members living under one roof. He had called me for help, explaining that his youngest daughter, eleven-year-old Ankita, was in the grip of some evil force and had been suffering for a long time as a result. As a paranormal investigator heading the PAIRS team, I had chosen to give this case utmost priority, because the victim was a child. Pooja, who was especially gifted in sensing the presence of spirits even when they were invisible to the naked eye, had also joined us on this investigation.

'You'll have to tell me what exactly is wrong with Ankita,' I told the

father.

He glanced at his family, wondering, perhaps, if he should go on. A woman, probably his wife, urged him to continue. He turned back to us and said in a slow, measured tone, 'We believe she is possessed.'

The utterance of the word 'possessed' instantly put me on my guard. Tales of possession are not uncommon in some parts of our country, with the rural and provincial imagination, stoked by accounts of such experiences, running wild. Anything out of the ordinary – a mental disorder, an odd behavioural trait or even a physical disability – is often attributed, without much justification, to possession.

'We believe she has not one, but many spirits inside her,' Prajapati declared, gesturing dramatically to illustrate his point, while his wife nodded emphatically, as if to corroborate the truth of her husband's words.

'Ankita started talking to herself some time back,' he went on. 'Then things became worse. One night, her mother found her sitting ramrod straight on her bed and chatting with someone. There was no one else in the room. Anikta was speaking in Gujarati, saying things like, '*Tame jaavo,*' and *'Mane chhodi do*'. 'Go away. Leave me alone.' My wife called me hurriedly to witness the scene. It chilled us to the bone. That was when we decided to get in touch with you.'

'How long has she been unwell?' I asked, choosing my words carefully.

'It started a few months ago,' said the girl's mother, speaking up for the first time. 'At first, she developed a sudden aversion to the idea of visiting the temple. We go to the Hanuman temple every Saturday. But one day, all of a sudden, my daughter began to scream and howl that she didn't want to go there. Even when my nephew's *mundan* ceremony was performed in the house, Ankita locked herself up in her room while the punditji was chanting the mantras. Next, she stopped eating. And…'

'And what?'

'She even… I don't know how to say this…she has even stopped going to the toilet. She has soiled her room many times. Despite all our scolding… Oh, this is so embarrassing for us!'

'The stray dogs might be soiling her room, Aunty,' a young boy from the group said.

'What stray dogs?' I asked.

'Since Anku fell sick, all these stray animals come into the house,' the boy elaborated. 'Dogs, cats… Can't figure out how they enter the house. Maybe, she opens the door and lets them in. They are in her room in the morning, resting on the floor by her bed. Sometimes, on the bed too. I wonder how she is so comfortable in their presence. Earlier, she used to be scared even of harmless kittens.'

'And then there is that thing I saw,' another woman, possibly an aunt, chipped in.

The afflicted child's father shook his head. 'Only you saw that, Kusum. We must only speak of things we are sure of.'

'But I did see it!' Kusum persisted. She turned to us and said excitedly, 'You know what I saw? I had gone to her room to wake her up from her afternoon nap, when I saw her floating in the air. Like this…' She stretched out her arms to illustrate her point, her many ornaments jingling in unison as she did so. 'She was completely stiff and straight, floating, really, about two feet above her bed. I have avoided her room since.'

I shook my head in disbelief. The poor girl was ill, I surmised, and her family was entertaining fanciful theories like possession, which looked as if it had come straight out of some daily television soap.

'Have you consulted a doctor?' I asked somewhat firmly.

Of course, the father would not have done so, I decided. I should have advised him to do so right away, and then tactfully withdrawn myself from the case. I cursed myself for not having sought more information over the phone, before getting involved.

But to my great surprise, the man promptly replied, 'Yes, of course we consulted a doctor. Susheela, get Ankita's medical file.'

There was a file. An entire file! An orange file, with a large religious symbol on the cover with the girl's full name was pulled out. Inside were several reports from multiple doctors. They had even taken the girl to doctors in Mumbai.

'You're probably thinking that this is all blind faith and superstition on our part,' Prajapati said. 'But only we know what we are going through. We may be small-town people, but we are educated.'

I could sense the hurt pride in his voice and understood that he had read my scepticism as a slight to the dignity of his family.

'That's why we called you,' he went on, 'instead of going to some *aghori* baba or exorcist, as other folk living here would have done.'

His words made sense.

'All right,' I said. 'But we will need to talk to your daughter – with your permission, of course.'

'Of course!' the man said. 'But please don't record her.'

'We won't,' I promised. 'We don't record children.'

---

Ankita looked younger than her years. Maybe her condition, whatever it was, was responsible for that. Though her hair was tied in neat, well-oiled plaits and she was in a clean yellow frock, there was something dishevelled about her appearance. The moment I laid eyes on her, I sensed her inner turmoil.

She came in and sat on a cot in front of us, occupying as little space as

possible, as though shrinking into herself. Her mother promptly seated herself next to her.

Pooja, who has a friendly manner and a way with children, broke the ice. 'Ankita, your family tells me you've been having some difficulties,' she began. 'We are here to help you now. You can trust us and tell us about your problems. Will you tell us what is wrong?'

The girl did not speak right away. She merely stared at everything around her with large, frightened, unblinking eyes, which rapidly began to well up. They darted from one person to the other, trying to gauge the new people in her environment.

'We are just friends, Ankita,' Pooja said gently.

The girl nodded. That was, at least, some response, I thought. Then she raised her hand. Pointing at the empty space behind me, which was where the cowshed stood, she asked in a feeble, halting voice, 'Who are those women?'

We turned around sharply to see what she was pointing at. Other than the cow, there was nothing in the cowshed. It was a dark space, with the usual odours of a cowshed – grass, cow dung, damp earth. A small opening in the roof of the shed allowed in some light.

'Which women? Who do you see?' I probed.

'They trouble me,' the girl said. 'Take them away from here.'

'Ankita,' Pooja now said, resorting to the technique of making people feel at ease by addressing them by name. 'You don't need to worry. We'll take care of those women. Have you seen them before?'

The girl gulped in fear and nodded. 'They come here all the time.'

'How many women do you see?' Pooja went on.

The girl raised two fingers.

'Can you describe them?'

'One is tall, very tall.' The girl raised her chin and looked at the ceiling of the cowshed, which was a generous 15 feet high. 'She is very, very thin and wears a black saree. She is angry and cruel. She wants to take me with her. Sometimes, she enters my body and makes me do things.'

'Enters your body? How do you know that?'

'I can feel it. It makes me sick. She is looking at me now… Oh!'

'Don't be scared, Ankita. Who is the other woman?'

'She is dressed in white. She is also stuck here. She does not harm me, but she is not strong enough to protect me from her sister.'

'They are sisters?'

The girl nodded.

I halted the interrogation at the point. The girl was evidently suffering from something, but I wasn't too inclined to believe it had anything to do with ghosts. In different circumstances, I'd have dismissed this as a case that required psychiatric assistance, but what stopped me from doing so was the terrified look on her face.

Pooja called time out for a group meeting to discuss the case. We excused ourselves from the Prajapatis and stepped outside their gate.

I advanced the argument that this was a case of mental illness. Children often create imaginary entities and for those with powerful imaginations, these entities can become all too real. Also, the girl's gullible family had fed her fanciful imagination with their own half-baked notions. Levitations and possessions seldom happened in real life. Any paranormal investigator would attest to that.

Then Pooja said something that put quite a different spin on things. 'Sarbajeet, I need you to reconsider the merits of this case,' she began. 'What's the true purpose of our group? Doesn't our work go far beyond trying to discover if ghosts exist or not? For this little girl, given the state she is in right now, ghosts do exist. She is terrified of them. The entire family is held hostage by the trauma she is being put through. If we don't help them out of this situation, we are defeating our own purpose as a team.'

Her words made sense to me. Whether there were ghosts or not, we had to dispel the family's fear of them. We had to throw light on darkness, as our motto stated.

With that purpose in mind, we went back into the house and told the family that we were ready to begin the investigation.

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We began by exploring the house with Mr Prajapati. He took us around the large property, pointing out various locations. The house had eight rooms in all, arranged around one central sitting area. Curiously enough, all the windows in every room were shut. It was on later inspection that I observed they weren't merely shut but had been completely sealed. I asked Prajapati the reason for this. He said it was to keep the mosquitoes on the farm away. There were nasty insects that would enter the house even in the daytime. If they bred inside, they could wreak havoc and spread disease. I did not find that explanation entirely convincing.

Prajapati led us to the terrace. From there, we could see how vast the property really was. The house was at the centre of sprawling fields. There were no crops growing at the time – Prajapati explained it wasn't the season for any of their usual crops – but this sight also gave us an impression of how well-to-do the family was.

My attention was drawn to an area down in the fields next to the south-east corner of the house. In the middle of an open patch of land was something that looked like a huge fireplace. There were large pots around it, placed upside down, and several logs were stacked in a pile nearby. I asked Prajapati about it.

He replied, somewhat hesitantly, 'We did something there to satisfy my old mother. You see, she still adheres to her own traditions and beliefs and we had to play along and keep her happy. When Anku's condition deteriorated, my mother had asked for a tantric to be summoned.'

I was stumped. Hardly minutes ago, the man had vehemently denied having anything to do with black magic.

'It was only to satisfy Amma, believe me,' he went on earnestly. 'The tantric inspected the house and said that there were evil spirits here. To keep them away, we had to appease them by feeding them for twenty-one days.'

'Feeding whom?' I asked.

'The spirits.'

'Oh! And did you?'

'Yes,' he admitted. 'We had a local *bawarchi* come up here and cook in that tandoor. It was a simple meal of rice, dal, and one vegetable preparation. The meal was then laid out and kept overnight in three pots there.'

'And? Did the spirits come?'

My sarcasm wasn't lost on the man. 'Please don't judge us,' he implored, 'and yes, the pots would be empty in the morning.'

There was a strange gleam in the man's eye as he said that. His words did not match his expression. Though he had repeatedly denied having any faith in black magic, it did seem as if he wasn't entirely sceptical about it.

'It's all right,' I assured him. 'We will begin our investigation now.'

Prajapati took the hint and left us on our own. We walked down to the sitting area and began setting up the equipment.

Savio asked, 'What do you think, Sarbajeet? Did the spirits really come to eat the meal prepared for them?'

'Of course not!' I replied. 'There are stray animals all around the place. They must have polished off the food.'

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Due to the barricaded windows, the sitting room was stiflingly airless and warm, and the temperature seemed to be rising by the minute. There was a ceiling fan whirring above, but it wasn't enough to circulate air around the spacious room. It made us wonder how the Prajapatis lived in these conditions.

It was time for the team to engage in another group discussion.

'So now that you have gone through the house and met the family, what do you think of all this?' Pooja asked me.

'Let's find out,' I said.

'You think the entire family is making this up, don't you?' she persisted.

It was getting hotter inside the room and I needed a sip of water. That was when another idea struck me.

'There's another theory I'd like to share with you,' I said, my excitement growing. 'I read about this particular case in Mexico. A family had to hide from the police or the local mafia or something. They had taken refuge in their shop, after shuttering and locking it from the outside to give the impression that no one was there.

'Anyway, they stayed holed up there for months, surviving on the food stocks they had already kept for this very purpose. Six months later, when the shop was forcibly opened from the outside, all the family members were found dead. The sole exception was their little boy, who sat huddled in a corner. All the other members had slit each other's throats. It was not as if they had run out of food and been driven to take this desperate step. They still had enough food left and everything else they needed, but the stifling heat and the oppressive nature of confinement had driven them to the brink of insanity. Unbearable heat does the strangest things to people. In this case, it had made the family hallucinate. The young survivor related that his family had imagined an enormous monster of a rat approaching to feed on their flesh. It drove them mad. The little boy, however, saw no such creature. The point to be noted is that this child would sometimes sneak out of the shop at night through a small hole in its wall. He alone could slip in and out through it. Which meant that he was not permanently confined to the room like the others but could exercise the choice of going outdoors.'

'Interesting!' said Pooja. 'Hallucinations en masse?'

'Possibly. Listening to the statements of the Prajapatis, I am inclined to conclude that they are all in some kind of delusional state. Anyway, we have to get on with our job. Let's conduct an investigation and see what happens.'

It was nearing evening. While Pooja and I were engrossed in our discussion, Savio and the others had set up various pieces of equipment, including a night-vision camera, a full-spectrum GoPro* and a motion sensor. Savio came over to hand us our handheld devices.

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Hours passed. Darkness set in. Nothing untoward had occurred so far. The family had moved out on to the verandah, leaving us to explore the house to our satisfaction. I had asked them to keep a close watch on Ankita and notify us immediately if they noticed any unusual development. But apart from the routine noises of rural fields at dusk, we heard nothing remarkable or noteworthy.

Then at 8.45 p.m., strange things began to happen.

It started with a sudden, unexplained drop in temperature inside the room, like a perceptible chill invading your space. All of us felt it at the same time. It was a strange kind of chill, distinct from the usual seasonal cold. This feeling was knife-sharp, slicing through our clothes and creeping into our very bones. I hurried over to check the temperature sensor. Yes, the temperature had, indeed, plummeted.

'Now look at that!' Pooja whispered. 'What do you think caused it?'

I didn't have a ready answer. I, the sceptic in this case, was now seeing evidence of something uncanny happening. Even as we looked at the digital scale, the temperature seemed to decrease ever so slowly.

About fifteen minutes later, there was a loud crash in the kitchen. It sounded as if one of the utensil racks had come off its moorings and landed on the floor. Rushing to the kitchen ahead of the others, I was astounded to see an overturned stainless-steel pot on the floor, rocking back and forth on its rim.

'That's it!' I said. 'We need to investigate this place thoroughly.'

'We're already doing so,' Pooja remarked.

'You know what I mean,' I said.

It was at this point that I began to feel there really was something in the house beyond the earthly dimension. It wasn't just the sudden drop in temperature or the clanging of the utensils in the kitchen that had triggered this feeling. My sixth sense was at work now and there was a distinct vibe about the house that had eluded me earlier. Until then, I had not considered the case with much seriousness. It had seemed like a normal household to me. But now, there was a tingling feeling growing, the kind that usually led to hair-raising experiences.

'Okay, we need to step things up,' I said decisively. 'I am getting a certain vibe now. I don't know what it is, but it wasn't there earlier. What do you say, Pooja?'

'I cannot say for sure right away,' she replied. 'At least, not yet.'

'Do you feel the vibes too?'

'I have been feeling them since morning,' she replied, 'from the time the girl told me she could see those women in the cowshed.'

Everything changed at that moment. My scepticism had evaporated; there was something palpable here. We had no idea, though, what we were up against. Whatever it was, Ankita had seen it and any entity that was capable of tormenting a little girl that way could be nothing but pure evil. Given her fragility, I knew we had to tread with the utmost caution.

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The Ankita Prajapati case was unique for another reason; it was the first

time we would be using an EMF pump,* a device rarely used in paranormal investigations. The Prajapati home was also the ideal location for its use. It ticked all the boxes. It offered a closed space, there were few electrical disturbances around and the entity we were investigating seemed reluctant to manifest itself. It was my hunch that if we provided the entity with an appropriate stimulus, the device would enable it to give us some sign of its presence.

Shiva was given the task of handling the EMF pump. He set it up on a table and stationed himself next to it, ready for my signal.

Then I said, loud and clear, 'Hello there, whoever is present here that I cannot see. A little girl in this house has been sighting you. She has told me about it and now I ask you to tell me what you want from her.'

We waited for one minute, two minutes, five minutes… I gestured to Shiva to amp up the EMF pump. The whirring of the magnet, now the only sound in the room, increased. With that, our trepidation heightened.

'If you are here, you could show yourself to us,' I said. 'We have made this room more conducive for you to manifest.'

For a while, there was no response.

Savio was positioned near the room's main door. He had placed a tripod there, with the GoPro mounted on it. All of a sudden, he began to wave his hands frantically; he was seeing something on the camera's small screen that wasn't visible to us. He gestured that we should stand absolutely motionless so that he could record the disturbance without any hindrance.

My eyes were fixed on him now. There was something unusual happening, for sure. To get a better view of what it was, Savio now dropped to a crouch and leaned forward to peer into the screen.

'Something's moving,' he mumbled, his voice barely a whisper.

As I slowly proceeded towards him, he warned, 'Don't come close…'

At that very moment, something really bizarre happened. Now Savio is a tall guy and though his build isn't muscular, he is quite agile. He had been sitting on his haunches, balanced on his heels, as he peered into the camera, when for no good reason, he suddenly lost his balance. The next moment, he was struggling in vain to clutch on to something solid to break his fall. Within seconds, he had hit the floor, landing hard on his back. As we rushed to help him up, the tripod tipped over too. The GoPro landed on the floor (and received a dent on one of its corners) and the main door of the house swung open.

'What happened, Savio?' I asked.

But before he could utter a word, there was a loud thud outside. With a shock, I realized that was where the family had gathered, out on the verandah. There was no time to find out if Savio was all right. Without a thought, I rushed out, with Pooja following me.

The Prajapatis were on their feet. They were all staring in horror at the little girl seated on the cot. To all outward appearances, she looked normal, but if you looked closely, there was something in her face, an expression of such agonizing pain that no words can do it justice.

'Wh-what's happening to my Ankita? What did you do?' the mother screamed.

'Ma'am, please, not now!' Pooja implored, as we strode up to the girl, gesturing to the family to make way. 'What do you see, Ankita?' Pooja asked, taking full stock of the situation. 'Don't worry… Tell us, we're here.'

The child was mumbling something. Her lips moved, but the sound that emerged was not decipherable as words. Part of the reason was that she had started rocking violently, her body moving back and forth and causing the bed she was sitting on to rock too. I noticed that the cow in the shed was mooing in anguish and the thought struck me that it was quite unusual for cows to moo at that hour of the night. It was nearly 10 p.m.

'Whatever is in her mind is now taking control,' I said. 'Do you see anything, Ankita?'

In all that confusion, I managed to decipher a few distinct words issuing from her lips: 'They are here…both of them… The bad one wants to take me away… The other one is not letting her to do that… They are fighting…'

'Fighting? Are they really fighting?'

'The bad one will kill her… Then she will take me away…'

'Ankita,' I said firmly. 'Look here. Look at me. These women are not more powerful than you are. You are strong. You must not let them control you.'

Ankita shook her head. 'I can't…'

I could see that her fingers were so tightly clenched into fists that they had turned red. All through, I was aware of how tiny and delicate she was. Any misstep on my part could prove fatal for her. I had to step in cautiously, and the way to do that was to talk to her in her own language, to step into her shoes, as it were, and try to gauge what she was seeing.

'Will the bad woman hear me if I talk to her?' I asked Ankita.

Whether there was really a spirit or not, the most crucial task here was to make the girl believe that she was not alone in her fight against evil.

'What are you doing, Sarbajeet?' Pooja asked, concerned. 'Are you trying to enter the spirit dimension?'

'Do you know of any other way to save this girl?' I countered. 'Look at the way she trembles! Even if we take the spirits out tonight, will she able to fully come out of this experience and recover? I need to show her that she is not alone.' I turned to the girl again, 'Will you let me in with you,

Ankita?'

This time, the girl nodded. All this while, the Prajapatis had been gazing at the entire spectacle unfolding in front of their eyes. Speechless as they were, they had absolutely no clue as to what was going on.

'All right,' I told Ankita. 'I am in with you now.' In truth, I had not moved an inch from my place. My words had been uttered to boost the child's trust in me and convince her that she was not alone. 'I see her,' I went on. 'I see the woman in black. I will talk to her now.'

I held the girl's finger. It was to establish a connection with her. She reciprocated by curling her own finger around mine. It was as if I were taking my little sister on a journey. Or, in this case, she was taking me.

Speaking aloud for everyone present there to hear, I said, 'Hey, lady! You have wreaked enough havoc in this house. You have caused enough damage to this fragile little girl. I see that you are vain and selfish and won't even listen to the other woman's pleas. But she is not alone now. We are all with her. You have to leave now. I am not commanding you to do so, but making a humble request. You are a woman and I know that you will never want to harm a little girl.'

As I uttered those words, my gaze was fixed on Ankita's eyes which reflected the turbulence in her mind. The objective now was to create an exit route for the spirit. The girl had to witness the spirit's departure; it was the only way she could return to her normal self.

I looked around me. To the left of us, a path around the house led to the open cooking area. It seemed to me a good idea to use that space to create the breach.

I spoke out again: 'Lady, whoever you are, whatever your purpose, the time has now come for you to leave. I will make it easier for you. In that cooking area behind me is a firepit. This family believes you used to come there and eat their food. Now I am going to create a gate for you there. It will be a white gate. The moment you see it, I want you to go through it and you will be in eternal peace. Do this for me. Do this for the little girl. And do this for yourself.'

With those words, I took Ankita by the hand and walked towards the tandoor firepit. I could feel everyone's gaze following us; I sensed that they were holding their breath. But I did not let my composure waver.

The firepit lay in darkness. We were surrounded by the buzz and drone of hundreds of insects, many of which blindly collided with our faces.

I stopped about 10 feet from the tandoor pit. From close quarters, it looked much larger than it had from the terrace. It was a circular hole in the ground and there was still some firewood in it. I stood there and raised a finger in the space over it, my other hand still holding Ankita's.

'Child, do you see the woman still?' I asked her.

I did not turn to look at the girl, but sensed her nodding in

agreement.

'Has she come with us?'

The girl made a feeble grunt, indicating assent.

'Okay, so now, lady,' I said in a louder voice, 'this is the pit and here is the gate. It is a white gate and once you pass through it, you will be set free forever. All your problems and troubles will come to an end.'

From the way Ankita shook, I understood that she was seeing it all. Her eyes were wide open now, staring at that empty space above the pit.

'I will count down from three now,' I announced. And after the briefest of pauses, I said, 'Three…two…and one…'

At once, the entire place was plunged into silence. No one spoke for a long time. Ankita's body trembled violently once more and then became still. Her mother ran up to her and held her in her arms. Seeing that the girl was now still, I signalled to the team that it was over.

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Half an hour later, when we had finished packing up our equipment, we went to see the Prajapatis for a last word. Ankita's mother had led her to her room. We were told that she was sleeping soundly.

Prajapati, who was now shaking visibly in reaction to all that he had witnessed, asked me, 'So there really were spirits in this place? Did you manage to record something on your camera?'

'Mr Prajapati,' I began, 'this investigation had us stumped, to be honest. For the first time in our years of working together, a case has caused a conflict of opinion within our own team. While some of my colleagues felt that there were spirits here, I did not agree with them. Having gone through many experiences, I can say with confidence that places that are really haunted give off some kind of negative energy. I did not sense that when I walked into your house. Yes, there was a time in the evening when I did feel such vibes, but that was brief and it could simply have been because we were in such a hot, suffocating environment.'

'But all that you did just now? Opening the gate and all?'

'That was all for the benefit of your daughter,' I explained. 'She is at an impressionable age and for some reason, she had hallucinations about spirits. Maybe, it was a book she had read or a movie she had watched or just her fanciful imagination at play. My little act was to show her that the spirit truly had walked out of her life and would never return. It's a kind of hypnosis. But I'd advise you to tell her the truth only when she is older: that there were no spirits at all.'

'Really? So all of that…'

I placed a reassuring hand on Prajapati's shoulder. 'Trust me, nothing's wrong with your house. Your daughter will feel better

tomorrow. You have a great property. Live happily and in peace. And may I suggest you open all those windows? Instead of barricading them like this to keep out insects, use mosquito nets.'

With that, we bade the family goodbye.

Later, when we were back in the office, Pooja asked me if there really had been no spirits in the Prajapati home.

When I confirmed it, she asked, 'How can you say that, especially after all that we saw in the room? What about Savio falling down?'

'He was just sitting awkwardly. He lost his balance. I am sure that pot falling off the rack was also just a coincidence.'

'So this was all a wasted trip?'

'Relax, Pooja,' I said reassuringly. 'I needed to say that to Prajapati. This is one case where I cannot state with conviction if there were spirits in that house or not. There might have been, there might not. But I didn't want Prajapati living the rest of his life on that isolated property in a state of apprehension, believing that spirits had once haunted the place.'

'Oh, I see,' said Pooja.

It was then that we heard someone calling out to us from the inner room of our office. It was Savio. His face had lost all colour. His laptop was open in front of him and he was staring at something on the screen. 'I was just checking the recordings, and…and…this is what I saw…'

We crowded around the screen for a look. My gaze followed the direction of his finger.

And what we saw made us freeze.

Hovering mid-air near the farthest wall of the house were two blobs of light. One of them emanated a whitish glow; the other was a black shadow. They were in some kind of motion and awkwardly bent towards each other. If you looked closely enough, you would almost say that they were fighting each other…

# 4

# THE HAUNTED FACTORY

*Surat, 2018*

BY THE MIDDLE OF 2018, we had conducted over 200 investigations in different parts of India. And we were beginning to discern a pattern. Most paranormal occurrences were reported in places that were far removed from areas with an active population. In other words, isolated and desolate. As a result, we had been yearning for a different kind of adventure.

As if in answer to our prayers, we soon received a call to investigate a spate of unexplained phenomena in a textile factory, a workplace that employed over 300 workers, which was situated in the middle of a populated town and in the heart of much everyday activity.

Pooja received the call on her private number. Soon, we were discussing the matter at a meeting. Usually, after receiving an invitation for a project, we took around ten days to lock it. But so great was our enthusiasm for this particular one that we found ourselves at the factory within three days. Apart from our own avid interest in pursuing the investigation, the factory owner himself was insistent that we waste no time in getting to the bottom of the problem that was besetting his workers.

Thirty-one year old Saptak Doshi had recently inherited the factory on his father's demise. As a boy, he had spent a lot of time in the factory, assisting his father in his work. Even back then, he remembers, his father's workers would advise him to stay away from certain working zones within the factory, because 'some activities' were allegedly going on there. The young Doshi had taken it as regular caution being doled out to teenagers. It was only now, after taking over from his father, that Doshi had begun to understand the real significance of the workers' words of caution.

As we sat with him in his office, he recalled his experience of working in the factory as a boy.

'I would visit this factory a lot in my growing-up years,' he began, 'and hear all sorts of tales. The old employees from dad's time would claim that the factory was haunted. Being a sceptic, I dismissed it as old wives'

tale. But dad would never allow me to stay here after working hours or to even use the bathroom here. He was quite adamant about it. Well, this went on for years.

'Last year, after dad passed away, the factory was handed over to me. One of the first things I did was run a check on the place to ensure we were following all the safety guidelines. That was the first time I noticed weird things happening.'

'What kind of weird things?' I asked.

'Well, where do I begin?' Doshi leaned back in his chair. 'There was this one occasion when the machines started operating on their own. It was around 9 p.m. I was surveying the main floor. Most of the workers had left. All of a sudden, there was a loud, whirring noise. I turned to see if anyone else was in the room with me. There was no one, but the dyeing and bleaching machine had turned on by itself! I didn't dwell on it at that moment. Having taken over the place recently, there were operations I wasn't familiar with, and I didn't really know how to turn off that machine. I called the manager over the phone. He told me how to turn off the mains.'

'Oh. And then you turned off the mains and left?'

'I did,' Doshi replied, swallowing nervously. 'Then more strange things began happening as the days went by. Smudge marks from fingerprints began appearing on the bales of white cloth. Prints came out on cloth that we hadn't fed into the machines. Finished fabric was torn to shreds overnight and left lying on the floor in the morning. It caused me great monetary loss.'

'It sounds like an act of vengeance,' Pooja observed.

'It truly seemed to be so,' Saptak agreed. 'About a couple of months ago, a long-time worker of ours nearly lost his hand while operating the cutting machine. Luckily, his co-worker caught hold of him in the nick of time and pulled him away. The man was terrified, screaming and shouting, impossible to pacify. But eventually, we managed to piece together what had happened to him. He had felt as if some unseen force were deliberately holding his hand down on the machine with the intention of causing him harm. We tried our best to calm him down and commiserate with him, but he was in no mood to listen. He even abused us all, including my dead father. He claimed that this factory was the devil's lair and what not. He left our employ, never to return. And that brings me to the worst part of my problem.'

'Which is?'

'Over a hundred workers have resigned from the factory since that incident,' Doshi announced. 'No one says anything overtly, but the undercurrent of malaise and discontent is quite strong. Our manager, Chetan Gadia, is an old hand here. People trust him. When he tried persuading the workers to stay on by explaining that these were nothing

but malicious rumours, and there was nothing wrong with the factory, the workers responded by narrating their own harrowing experiences of haunting on the premises. Seems like they all had something to say.'

'Could we meet Mr Gadia?' I asked.

Chetan Gadia turned out to be in his late forties, with hair thinning over his scalp and turning grey on the sides. He came in with a sombre look and took a seat.

'Are these the investigators?' he asked Doshi.

Doshi nodded.

'I had told Saptak bhai's father about the root of the problem long ago, but he wouldn't listen to me,' Gadia informed us. 'I had explained that the place's *vastu* was all wrong. People give *vastu* scant importance nowadays, but how can a science that was put together thousands of years ago by our wise ancestors be baseless?'

I nodded sympathetically, disinclined at that moment to share my thoughts on *vastu* or feng shui. 'What are your *own* experiences like?' I asked him.

The man's eyes narrowed as he replied, 'Well, not mine directly, but the experiences of the workers here are quite worrying. There's the matter of the locker rooms, for instance.'

'Oh, do tell us about that,' I urged.

'We have separate locker rooms for our male and female workers, where they change in and out of their work uniforms,' he said. 'Strange things have been reported about these locker rooms. At times, men have claimed seeing a girl's figure in their locker room when alone. And the women complain of a young man's ghost in their locker room.'

'Bloody indecent ghosts! Why don't they visit their own gender's locker room?' Savio joked.

Gadia went on, 'Nobody goes alone to the locker rooms, if they can help it. If they have reported for work early, they wait for the others to join them before going in there.'

'What exactly happens there?' Pooja asked.

'Lots of things,' Gadia replied. 'There is a banging noise from inside the lockers, as though someone is in there. Objects like tiffin boxes suddenly drop to the floor, scattering food all around. Workers have reported hearing murmurs and howls. There was this worker who was in the locker room alone one evening. All of a sudden, he heard someone breathing down his neck. The next moment, he swears he heard a girl screaming right into his ear.'

The meeting went on for half an hour more, as we noted all the details of the case from the factory owner and the manager. It was evident that something quite out of the ordinary was going on there. Then Doshi pulled out a file with some photographs for us to look at.

'These are the screenshots taken at night with our cameras from

certain areas of the factory,' he said. 'You will not see any activity in these, but I thought they would help you understand the layout of the place. The factory is a huge property.'

I took the pictures and passed them on to Pooja. Then shaking hands with both the men, we left the office to start our work.

'The place has a terrible history,' Pooja said, her nose buried in the pictures. 'Oh, this is bad!'

'What do you see?'

'Nothing specific,' she replied. 'But there's this cloud all over. Not just in these pictures. Look all around. The moment I walked in, I felt as if I were entering a dense fog of gloom. There's a lot of – ' she paused to find an appropriate word ' – *pain* here.'

Pain. That was the word she had chosen to use. And I was one with her as far as that impression was concerned. The factory was silent now, but we had sensed the misery that was weighing down the place.

'As far as I can see, there are two main areas to check out here,' I observed. 'The machine-room floor and the locker rooms. Let's start with the machines. What do you say?'

The team agreed. We came to the main floor where the machines were located, looked around and took a deep breath. Ahead of us lay an eventful night.

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The main floor looked every bit as intimidating as it had been described to us. Four large machines had been installed in the four corners of the large hall. The ceiling was about twenty feet high. In one of the corners was a large duct that allowed chemicals like spent dyes and bleach to flow out as effluents.

We surveyed the electrical fittings in the factory. One glance revealed that they were quite old. The illumination came from old-fashioned tube lights encased in metallic cages. There were gigantic ceiling fans in the four corners of the room. There was no air conditioning to speak of, but there was a huge exhaust fan. We switched on each of these electrical devices in turn and found that all of them functioned well, despite their age. We also had an operator start the machinery to understand how each one functioned.

Now we had the hall to ourselves. It was approaching 10 p.m. and, apart from the distant sound of vehicles on the street outside, silence pervaded the place. Savio and Shiva had unpacked the equipment and set up a motion sensor in front of the dyeing and bleaching unit that had been the scene of the allegedly terrifying incident. This particular unit was huge and included a cylinder that could easily have accommodated three men inside it. Various inlets fed into the machine and as many

outlets exited from it. It was operated by a heavy crank situated near the operator's cabin, along with the cranks for all the other machines in the room.

I brought out my faithful K2 meter and began assessing the area. Also known as a ghost meter, this device is commonly used in paranormal investigations. It measures the electromagnetic force (EMF) in the surroundings. Paranormal science maintains that all entities can alter the EMF around them. Hence, any odd fluctuation on the K2 meter indicates an unnatural presence. Normally, this meter has five display lights. The first light is always on, as we already have some EMF around us. A mobile charger or some other electronic device could make two or three lights blink. But anything beyond that defies explanation.

This was just a preliminary investigation, since I knew the K2 meter would be useless for the most part, with the preponderance of electrical fields in the vicinity. As I expected, it remained stable at one light, with the second light blinking intermittently, which is normal for such a space.

As I walked on, I tried to gauge the vibes emanating from the place. They were stronger here on the floor; the place was a cesspool of negative energy, as if that energy were spilling out of it. I experience a choking sensation when I am near such places, especially those that have painful histories. And it has always preceded a harrowing experience. It was a signal for me to prepare myself for whatever was to come. It was time to communicate.

Standing in the middle of the hall, from where I was equidistant from all the four machines, I said, 'Hello. Is there anybody here?'

It was a general question, one that would never be answered, but it was important to ask it, if only to let my voice and its intonation be heard. I must point out here that we were all standing in near darkness, the only light filtering in through the high windows being the illumination from the street lamps, which was woefully inadequate for the vast premises.

'We come in peace,' I said. 'We heard about some strange things going on here. They are terrifying the poor workers in this factory. The workers need their jobs. Please, if anyone is out here, respond.'

Again, there was no response. I waited for several minutes, listening to the rhythm of my breathing which seemed to accelerate with every passing minute.

'All right, all right,' I said. 'Maybe this is not your comfort zone. But I know one thing that you can do very well. I have been told that you can start these machines. If you could do that for me now, it would make me very happy.'

I had resorted to the age-old trick that adults use to make children do their bidding – rely on praise to win them over.

None of us expected anything to happen. It was not supposed to; it was barely thirty minutes since we had started the active investigation.

Meanwhile, Pooja was moving all around the area. She visited the operator's cabin, checked out the machines and the spaces behind them, walked up to the main door and even went out through it into the corridor and checked out every area minutely. She was trying to pick up on any strange vibration she might find at any spot. That's a task only she can do; she has never needed any help for it. So while she was walking by the spinning machine (the machine that spun the loose fibres into threads), she stopped all of a sudden.

'Here,' she breathed.

I ran up to her, taking care to tread lightly so that I made no noise.

'Something has happened here,' she said. She felt the air by waving her hands around her in much the same way that a blind person tries to feel objects around them. 'It was very bad. Blood has flowed here.'

'Can you see it?' I asked.

'No,' said Pooja. Her face had broken out in a sweat now, a sign of the strain to interpret the scene. 'But it's old. Very old.'

Then almost in tandem with Pooja's words, there was a humming sound. Something close to us, something gigantic
had been set in motion. We held our breath, for we knew what it was.

I was the first to muster the courage to look for the source of the sound.

It turned out to be the dyeing and bleaching machine. Imagine the horror of witnessing that sturdy mechanical giant starting off on its own in the dark, its many wheels whirring inside it, its enormous steel body vibrating with their movement.

'Is it…?' Pooja asked, unable to finish her sentence.

Savio mustered the courage to walk up to the machine. He placed the palm of his hand on the cylindrical tank, then said with wide-eyed wonder, 'It's moving. The machine is on!'

And then I noticed something that shook me. It was near the operator's room, where all the cranks were located: all the cranks were in the 'off' position.

The machine was working without electricity!

'What's going on here?' Savio said, breathing hard.

'I don't know,' I replied. 'But whatever it is, it's powerful and in a rage. It isn't easy for a spirit to start a heavy machine like that. This is the greatest evidence of physical manifestation we have ever seen.'

It was clear that the emotions driving this entity were quite intense. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for any abstract spirit to gain control of heavy mechanical implements such as these. The challenge now was to get to the bottom of this mystery.

'Can you read anything yet, Pooja?' I asked.

She was, at that moment, our only hope; she alone could find out what was going on in there.

'It has a very old history,' Pooja said. 'I am trying, but I keep hitting a wall.'

'What do you see?'

'There's a lot of sadness here. That's the only thing I am sure of.'

I decided that we had had enough of ghost-operated machines. There was another lead we could follow. I talked it over with Pooja.

'Pooja, listen,' I told her. 'I think we should head to the locker rooms. You take up the ladies' locker room, while I take up the gents'. We'll regroup here later. Meanwhile, Savio and Shiva can keep an eye on the machines.'

Leaving things as they were, we headed to the locker rooms. I saw Pooja enter the ladies' locker room. I turned around and proceeded to the gents' locker room with my K2 meter.

The locker room I entered turned out to be a narrow area with lockers mounted on walls facing each other. There was no ventilation. To top it all, the space reeked of an assortment of odours; I could smell everything from cold dal to sweaty socks.

I walked on, probing every possible area with my K2 meter, keeping a careful eye on any fluctuation in the lights. I noticed that my breathing had become laboured; it was probably the claustrophobic confines of the space getting to me. I wondered how Pooja was faring in the identical locker room at the other end of the factory.

Many of the lockers had been left unlocked and were unlabelled. Perhaps it was a pointer to the number of workers who had left their job, surrendering their lockers, which now lay unused. I scanned the interiors of some of the open lockers but came up with nothing. I tried every corner, even climbed up and checked the edges and corners of the ceiling. There was nothing out of the ordinary.

I came back into the hall where the machines were located, caught Savio and Shiva's questioning gaze and shook my head, indicating that I had drawn a blank in the locker room.

When Pooja emerged, however, she was drenched in sweat. She came and stood by us, breathing heavily, and said, 'Sarbajeet, let me lead the investigation now.'

'Did you see anything?' I asked.

She did not give a direct reply. Instead, she said, 'I will know better when I talk to the spirit.'

'So there *is* a spirit?' Savio asked.

At that, Pooja merely nodded. It was a brisk, steady nod and even as her head moved, a shiver ran down my spine. I handed Pooja the K2 meter, so she could carry out the rest of the investigation, and stepped back.

Pooja made for a specific spot in front of the dyeing and bleaching machine. She had the ghost meter in her hand, but didn't aim it ahead of her, the way I usually do; she let it remain in her hand, hanging by her side.

With great composure, she said, 'Hello. This is me, Pooja. I have been in the locker room and I saw someone there. It's a teenage boy of around fifteen. Am I right?'

Our jaws dropped as her words sank in. The spirit of a boy? Whatever did that mean? What had been the mortal fate of the boy, then?

A few seconds later, there was an abrupt metallic sound, as if something heavy had landed on the floor. We all wheeled around to check if anything had fallen. There was nothing. Only Pooja seemed oblivious to it. She stood gazing steadily at the machine in front of her. I doubted she had heard the sound, but her next words proved me wrong.

'You are giving me indications of your presence,' she said, 'but why don't you talk to me? I am here to listen to you. If you have been wronged in any way, let me know and I can help you.'

My attention was then diverted to the K2 meter in her hand. In the looming darkness, I could clearly see the higher-range lights blinking steadily. In another corner of the room, Savio and Shiva stood huddled together. They had witnessed this kind of situation before. The higher-range lights blinking meant that something was altering the electromagnetic field of the surroundings; something was approaching.

Still demonstrating a high degree of self-restraint, Pooja did not look at the lights, but I was astounded to discover that she knew what was happening.

'All right, so you wish to respond on my gadget now,' she said, 'and that's fine with me. I am a friend and I have seen something of your painful past. I will ask you a series of questions now. They might agitate you, but please understand that I am trying to give you release. Please bear with me.'

The lights went on.

'Is that boy yours?' she asked.

Almost instantly, the lights hit full range. Pooja looked back at us once with a winning smile, though our faces must have betrayed our feelings of dread.

Then she asked the next question: 'Do you also have another child, a girl, who is trapped in the men's locker room?'

Once again, the device lit up fully.

'And are you trapped in this dyeing machine?'

The lights stayed on now. This was maniacal; full range on the meter was like being inside a heavily powered device, such as a generator or an electric crane. I shuddered to imagine the kind of power the entity present with us possessed.

'You are their mother, then?'

The lights stayed on. There was also a buzzing sound. But wait… What was it? So far, I had assumed the ghost in the machine was male. Pooja had sensed that the entity was female.

'Where is the children's father?'

At this point, the most chilling experience of that night occurred. It was as if we had stamped on the ill-fated soul's most painful wound. There was an angry, hissing sound from the machine and a lot of steam was expelled all at once. I could hear this faint churning sound from within, not unlike the movement of the tumbler inside a washing machine. Unable to stay motionless, we left our individual positions and moved to the centre of the room.

'What's going on, Pooja?' I whispered in her ear.

I am not ashamed to admit that I was terrified. There is a limit with all entities, even the most docile ones. Here, it seemed as if that limit had been crossed three questions ago. Surrounded by those gigantic machines whose operation we were completely unfamiliar with, there could have been a thousand and one ways to die that night.

Then Pooja suddenly dropped the device. Wondering if she was feeling ill or uneasy, I reached out to steady her, but she merely turned and started walking again. Shiva called out to her, but I had grasped what was happening. I gestured to him to be silent and followed Pooja. I could tell that she was in a trance. It was leading her towards something only she could see in that moment.

As we followed her, the chill of the night seemed to seize us in its grip. It could have had something to do with my state of mind at the time, but I felt as if the air was becoming frostier with every step I took. Pooja walked towards the large gate of the factory's main hall and stepped out through it. This was in the opposite direction from where the offices were located. I followed her and found that we had arrived at the back of the factory, an area which was being used as a kind of dumping ground. Old and discarded machine parts and equipment lay scattered all around. Bales of defective cloth were piled in one corner, looking like an assortment of shrouds.

Pooja walked up to a heap of blue drums and stopped. The drums contained liquids of some kind, industrial waste for disposal, perhaps. I wasn't sure if it was safe for her to stand so close to them.

That was when she seemed to come out of her trance and her eyes focused on the world of the living, our world.

'Oh, damn!' she exclaimed. 'This is unbelievable! This is so tragic!'

I tried to calm her down.

'I know what happened here,' she said. 'We need to settle this right now. Let's talk to the owner.'

Saptak Doshi could not believe his ears. He vehemently shook his head at Pooja's request.

'No,' he said firmly. 'You just described everything that happened with you in the factory. And you're asking me, despite it, to accompany you there? Are you out of your mind?'

'Listen to me,' Pooja said firmly. 'You hired us to rid the place of the activity that has been going on here for years. And we now know what it is. Do you have any idea that this has been going on for seventy years, building up over time, and has now reached point where things might just combust into flames, incinerating you all? You have to be brave. Come into the hall and talk to them.'

Doshi looked at his manager and gulped. 'But what am I supposed to do?' he asked helplessly.

'You have to go and apologize.'

'Apologize? For what?'

The manager butted in now. 'Indeed. Why should he apologize? He has just taken over the factory. He has nothing to do with what happened in the past. You guys are mad.'

'All right, then, we are done here,' Pooja announced. 'Please announce a pack-up, Sarbajeet.'

We left the room and proceeded to the factory hall to gather our equipment. There was a complete hush around us.

Five minutes later, Gadia came and joined us.

'All right,' he said. 'We'll play your game. But you have to first give us every detail of what you have witnessed.'

We found ourselves back in Doshi's office. Despite the air conditioning, the young factory owner, was perspiring, while Pooja began recounting a tale so horrifying that it left our mouths dry.

'Okay,' she said. 'I saw a bunch of these scenes down there and the rest is an extrapolation. Are you sure you want to hear it?'

Gadia and Doshi nodded in unison.

'Seventy years ago, the factory was inherited by a family of four,' Pooja began. 'A man, his wife and their two teenage children. The man worked hard and they had a happy, fulfilled life, sustaining themselves on whatever income the factory brought them. However, there was someone – it could have been an elderly uncle – who could not bear to see such contentment. This evil person had his eye on the factory. He tried every trick in the book to cheat the family and gain control of the place, but in vain. And then he committed an act of villainy that has no equal.'

Pooja paused for a moment. A thick silence seemed to have descended on the room.

'One night, the family was at the factory,' she continued. 'The uncle was with them too. Perhaps, he had come over for a visit. There was another man with him, a strong, muscular man, a friend, perhaps, or the uncle's servant. These evil guys first struck the factory owner on the head and knocked him unconscious. Then they confined each of his children in a separate locker room. Perhaps, they were killed there and then or they died later either from suffocation or sheer fright. Then the lustful gaze of the killers fell on the man's wife. Perhaps, it was their plan from the very outset – they took turns in raping the woman. The man stirred back to consciousness while they were in mid-act and put up a brave fight to save his wife. But he was outnumbered. His wife was flung into the dyeing machine's cylinder and locked inside it. She struggled with all her might to get out, but finally died in the machine. The final atrocity committed by these two brutes was to kill the man.'

As Pooja neared the end of her sordid tale, we turned to look at Doshi. He had turned pale. His face wore an expression of utter horror as he hung on her every word; it was as if he could actually see the tragic events play out in front of his eyes.

'You mean…this evil man was one of my ancestors?' he finally managed to murmur.

The old manager shook his head. 'That is impossible,' he declared adamantly. 'Even if this story is true, the evil uncle was certainly not your ancestor. Your grandfather purchased the factory forty-seven years ago from another family.'

Doshi heaved a sigh of relief.

'However, the spirit of the woman and her children are still here,' Pooja explained, 'and they look upon you as a representative of their evil uncle who had no qualms about committing these gruesome crimes so that he could take over as the factory's owner. That's why you need to beg their forgiveness.'

'But what if they harm me?' Doshi asked.

'Not as long as I am here,' I reassured him, but I could see that my words did little to assuage the young man's fears.

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A trembling Saptak Doshi stood in the middle of his own factory hall; he was evidently seeing the place in a completely different light now. Pooja and I flanked him on either side, trying to reassure him as much as we could.

Pooja looked at the dyeing machine and spoke. 'Hello again,' she began. 'I am here to talk to you once more. Thank you for sharing your painful memories with me. I want to do whatever I can to relieve you of the pain you have been carrying for decades.'

She took a deeper breath and went on, 'I have Mr Saptak Doshi with me here. He is the current owner of this factory.'

Instantly, a whirring noise started in the machine. Doshi flinched, but I grasped his hand and cautioned him in a whisper to remain strong and courageous.

'Spirits take cowardice as a sign of evil intent,' I explained.

Speaking up again, Pooja said emphatically, 'He is not related to that evil man who committed all those atrocities against your family. Saptak is an honest, upright man, as hardworking and inspired by the dream to succeed as your family had been. Please don't harm him. I'll now ask him to talk to you.'

Doshi gulped. I felt his hand go cold against mine; the poor man was obviously frozen with terror. Adding to his fears were the noises in the machine. They were becoming louder and louder; the hissing, whirring and occasional clanking were beyond any logical explanation.

'Go on,' I urged Doshi.

'What do I say?' he whispered back.

'Find words of compassion,' I advised him. 'If you are a good man without any evil in your heart, you will say the right thing.'

Doshi braved himself to look directly at the machine. 'I am Saptak Doshi,' he said, fumbling a bit. 'I am the owner of this factory.'

The machine rattled, as if there were some animal trapped under it that was desperately trying to escape.

'I heard the tragic story from Pooja,' Doshi went on. 'Trust me, I was heartbroken to discover what had befallen your happy family. No one should ever have to meet such a fate. I too have a wife and two children. I understand the pain of what you have gone through.'

I let go of Doshi's hand at this point, realizing that he had gathered the courage to speak. Pooja and I stepped back. Doshi did not even notice that we were retreating.

'I am truly sorry for what happened to you and your loved ones,' he continued. 'Neither my family nor I are responsible for it in any way. We are not to blame in any manner. But for that you have suffered, I wish to beg your forgiveness, because that is all I can do to make amends so many years later. And I do so with complete understanding of the suffering you endured.'

There were tears in his eyes as he spoke.

'Please leave us,' Doshi implored. 'I entreat you to leave this place. You are terrifying innocent people, wreaking havoc in their lives. They are forced to leave the jobs they held at this factory and their children are going hungry as a result. You don't want that, do you?'

The machine hissed as he uttered the last few words. Realizing that he had crossed the line here, I intervened quickly and asked him to step back.

'There! I apologized as you asked me to,' Doshi told me. 'Now what next?'

'That was a heartfelt apology,' Pooja said approvingly. 'It is quite enough for the emotional release of the entities present here. Now we will facilitate their spiritual release from this place.'

'What do you mean?' Doshi asked.

At that, Pooja led us out of the factory hall and to the dumping area once again. All of us stood there for a while, waiting for her next move.

Pointing to the blue drums with the spent dye, Pooja said, 'Those unfortunate people were all buried at this spot. The area has always been used for dumping waste material and no one bothers to go through it. The family's remains should still be here, but I doubt if they will have survived all these years, what with all the chemical action on the ground.'

We stared at the spot, speechless, our hearts shrinking with fear, our hands instinctively reaching out to clutch each other's for reassurance.

'What the – ' Doshi muttered, breaking into a sweat again. 'What do we do now?'

I took over. 'We'll perform a cleansing ritual. We have done it several times and it has always yielded results. With the apology you rendered I am sure it will work. Rest assured, you will be rid of this presence.'

Gadia led a nervous Doshi out of the yard and we set to work.

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Three months later, I received a call from Saptak Doshi. To my great relief, the man who spoke to me now was far removed from the fumbling, jittery one I had seen at his factory on that unforgettable night.

'I should have called you sooner, but I wanted to be sure about a few things before I did,' he said. 'The indisputable fact is that whatever you did that night, it worked. Not a single complaint has come from any of the workers since.'

'That's splendid!' I said. 'So, the factory operations are in full swing again?'

'I don't know about that,' he said with a little hesitation.

'What do you mean?'

'I certainly could not have continued running the place after being aware of all that you had shared with me. I sold the factory a month ago. I haven't told the new owners anything about its past, but I think that's for the best.'

'Oh, I see…'

'May I confess something? I was initially sceptical when Gadia advised me to call your team over for an investigation. See, I am a

college-educated man and I never really believed in ghosts and spirits. Don't mind me saying this, but I had a rather low opinion of people who actually believed in ghosts. I thought they were fools. But after witnessing what I did that night, I have had reason to change my mind. Who are we to judge whether ghosts exist or not? When we believe so staunchly in gods and the concept of *aatma* lies at the very core of our system, why do we reject the very idea of ghosts?'

'Yes, that is an issue that has been debated for long,' I agreed.

'Your work has made me a more spiritual person,' Doshi acknowledged. 'I am reading a great deal and trying to have a better understanding of different faiths and beliefs. It has also helped me to know myself better.'

That was an unexpected bonus of our work, but it was most welcome. 'I am glad to hear that,' I told him.

'I also have more respect for you and your profession now,' Doshi admitted. 'Paranormal investigators – isn't that what you call yourselves? I can understand why your work is not so widely known. It is because you have to function in the shadows, under the radar, as it were. You and your work must remain anonymous much of the time. It's the same in my case; I will never be able to tell anyone that my factory was once haunted.'

'You're right,' I agreed. 'Our work demands the utmost secrecy.'

Doshi's final words before bidding me goodbye were most encouraging. 'What you are doing is a service for society,' he said. 'I hope more people come to understand that the human dimension cannot be the only one in existence. There *have* to be other things stemming from it – our spiritual counterparts, I mean. I wish you all the best in your future endeavours. May you solve many more cases, succeed in releasing more spirits that are in limbo and help people who live in fear of them gain a new perspective on them.'

With a smile, I disconnected the phone.

# 5

# THE ACCURSED TREE

## *Bhadrak, 2016*

IT WAS AN EARLY September morning in 2016. I had barely shaken off my drowsiness (I am not a morning person) when I received a call from a viewer of my television show, *Mana Ki Na Mana*. The man's name was Ashok Panda. He spoke with a heavy heart and had difficulty finding the appropriate words to express his thoughts. After some hesitation, he asked if I would agree to visit his house. The fear and anguish in his voice were palpable.

'Something terrible is happening to my family,' he said. 'I cannot explain the situation over the phone.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'It's something in your line of work,' he elaborated. 'It's something… otherworldly. Please don't turn down my request. This is urgent. There is simply no time to lose.'

Following that call, the PAIRS team got together for a meeting where we discussed the issue at length. Panda hadn't offered any specific information, but his voice had betrayed the trauma he was going through. We decided this was an assignment we couldn't possibly turn down.

Panda's home was in Bhadrak, a three-hour drive from Bhubaneswar. We set out in the morning, but by the time we reached the place, it was late afternoon. Though summer was at its height, there was a slight nip in the air as we neared the town. I attributed it to the dense forest cover surrounding it.

We reached the Panda house, only to find the family in a state of utter despair.

'Please come in,' Ashok Panda said, recognizing me immediately and welcoming me in along with my team.

Sensing the gloom pervading the house, I asked, 'Please forgive me for asking, Mr Panda, but what's wrong?'

At that, a woman seated in the room, evidently Mrs Panda, burst into tears. My gaze fell upon a bed behind her. On it lay a young man, about nineteen or twenty years old.

'That's my son, Nischay, Mr Mohanty,' Panda announced.

I moved closer to the bed. Almost at once, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of utter despondency. The young man looked to be in trauma – he lay there, listless, his eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling.

I stepped back. 'What has happened to him?' I asked.

'He has been in this condition for a month,' Panda informed me. 'A few weeks back, he came home from college a little later than usual and started behaving in a very peculiar manner. His food preferences changed abruptly, he stopped grooming himself and would do no work around the house. From the medical point of view, there was nothing wrong with him. But after a few days, a pattern began emerging in his behaviour that caused us great concern.'

'What kind of pattern?'

'At exactly half past seven every evening, his condition deteriorates. He turns unpredictable. His body starts convulsing, as if he were in terrible pain. He screams and beats the bed with his flailing arms and legs. He mutters words, but we can never understand what he is trying to say.'

'How long do these episodes last?'

'Two or three minutes,' Panda replied. 'But they are enough to give you a glimpse of hell.'

'I see,' I said.

The young man on the bed looked delirious at that moment. I could imagine him having some sort of a fit in the evenings. I could clearly make out how emaciated his frame was under the thin white vest he was wearing. I also noticed something else: all the windows in the room were tightly shut, their curtains drawn close. A soft glow from electric lights illuminated the room.

'Why are the windows closed?' I asked.

'He cannot bear the light,' Panda explained. 'It hurts him if we open even one window.'

'All right,' I said, getting up from my chair. 'Could you leave us alone with Nischay for a while?'

The Pandas looked at me with some concern. Then the father nodded resolutely and left the room.

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Even after his parents had left the room and he was left alone with complete strangers, the young man did not move a muscle. But his eyes kept darting all over the room.

'Nischay,' I called out. 'I am Sarbajeet. I have come here because I would like us to be friends. Can you hear me?'

He did not turn to look at me, but made an odd, hissing sound by

pursing his lips together.

'Nischay,' I persisted, 'if something is bothering you, you can tell me about it.'

He did not respond. I inched closer to him, ever alert to the slightest movement he might make, trying to remain unaffected by the terrible aura around him. I noticed that he was curling his toes, every now and then, as if a spasm of pain were passing through his body.

'Nischay,' I reached out towards the window next to his bed. 'Would you mind if I opened this window?'

Stretching, I caught hold of the curtain and slowly drew it aside, minutely observing the expression on his face.

As the curtain parted, a sliver of sunlight fell on his face. And just as his father had warned, there was an immediate reaction. Nischay screwed up his eyes so tightly that his entire face was contorted. As if that were not enough, he clamped his hands over his eyes and began to groan, as if he were experiencing a new dimension of pain altogether.

'It's okay, Nischay! It's okay,' I soothed. 'It's just the sunlight…'

But my words had no effect on him. His groans grew louder and brought his parents running into the room. I motioned them to remain quiet and drew the curtain close so that it was back in its original position.

Later, I sat with Panda in another room. 'There is something odd happening here, no doubt,' I remarked. 'Didn't you say he becomes delirious at 7.30 p.m.? The sun is about to set. We'll wait and see what happens.'

Panda nodded. I noticed the rising concern in his expression and felt for him. His misery was quite understandable. The young man was his only son. Seeing a healthy young man reduced to a vegetative state has to be one of the biggest misfortunes that can befall a family. We sat with Panda for a while, discussing his son's condition, while sipping tea offered by their kitchen maid.

All of a sudden, a loud scream distracted us. It had come from Mrs Panda. Her eyes bulging from their sockets, her mouth agape and frozen, she presented quite a sight. The clock on the wall behind her indicated that it was 7.31 p.m. Wasting no time, I turned to look at Nischay, and saw something close to a display of fiendish behaviour that made my blood run cold.

His entire body was convulsing, as if he were in great agony. Though his father and our team members, Shiva and Mason, tried their best to hold him down, Nischay could not be subdued or pacified. His convulsions were so violent that they made the bed rock against the floor, causing a deafening noise. I rushed to assuage his extreme distress, but before I could reach him, the young man suddenly sat up, ramrod straight, completely defying the force with which three strong men were

trying to hold him down.

'What is it? What is going on with you, Nischay?' I asked, looking directly into his bloodshot, watering eyes.

But instead of replying, Nischay swung his arm through the air with great force, as though wielding a sword. I swerved to defend myself from what looked like an attack. The moment I did so, he leaped through and bounded to the front door. The next moment, there was a crash. The young man had flung the door open with such force that it now hung from its hinges, its deadbolt dangling. Then squealing like a pig being flayed, he darted away into the street.

'Where did he go?' I yelled.

'I… I don't know…' Panda said. 'We must follow him.'

Without another word, we ran out of the house in hot pursuit.

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The boy was clearly under some powerful influence. The way he ran, zipping past everyone and everything on the street, without a moment's pause, was a sight to behold. It took us all our strength to keep up with him. It helped that the street was, for the most part, straight, without too many bends; it helped us keep him in sight all through.

Nischay reached the outskirts of the town and paused. Facing him now was the state highway. We realized, to our horror, that he intended to cross that highway. In his delirious state, he was oblivious to the dozens of heavy vehicles zooming past in both directions. His father's shouts of warning went unheeded. Before we could reach him, the young man had set off on a blind run across the highway.

Some strange energy was driving him. He ran like no man has run, swerving through the vehicles, completely ignoring their angry honking and the drivers' wild curses, and reached the other end. By some strange quirk of fate, he had remained unscathed.

Across the highway lay the outskirts of a forest. It was sparse at this point, but much denser inside, where lurked the danger of savage predators on the prowl.

'Don't go in there, Nischay!' his father screamed, but to no avail.

As we watched the young man heading for the dense rows of trees, we were left with no option but to brace ourselves for crossing the highway at a run against oncoming traffic.

I was the first to reach the other side. Without waiting for the others to catch up, I broke into a run and followed Nischay. By now, I could barely make out his silhouette as he rushed past the trees. There was no telling where he was headed and what dangers awaited those who were following him. I continued to sprint down the path he had taken, trying to keep him in sight. Then at one point, he came to a dead halt.

As he stood with his back to me, his arms hanging loose on either side, I could tell that he was staring at something ahead of him. A weird humming sound came from his lips. Cautiously, I crept up close to him, not daring to disturb him in that state, and tried to minutely observe every little change in his countenance.

His father and the others had caught up by now. Panda followed his son's gaze and when he realized what it was fixed on, his face lost all colour.

'What is it?' I asked him in a whisper.

Suddenly, Nischay spoke up. The words, spoken in Odia were quite distinct: 'I want to go to the tree.'

'Oh my god!' Panda exclaimed, his expression one of horror as he followed the direction of his son's gaze. 'He is referring to the tree that bears a curse!'

'What tree?' I asked, puzzled.

'There's a tree inside the forest. That's where this all started – '

But Panda's explanation was abruptly cut short; his son had collapsed and now lay on the ground in a heap, as if life itself had abandoned him.

The tree Ashok Panda had mentioned was a sprawling ancient Saptaparni *(Alstonia scholaris)*, popularly known as the Indian Devil's Tree. With its lustrous olive-green leaves and pale green boughs, laden with blossoms, the species, in general, has a certain visual appeal and seems quite undeserving of the notoriety it has earned. But the lore surrounding it has inspired several deep rooted superstitions. It is believed, for instance, that if a man even touches the bark of a Saptaparni after dusk, he will die within seven days. It stands to reason why in most villages people steer clear of these trees, as if their very presence were toxic.

The specimen that had caused such concern in the Panda family had already spawned several legends of its own. A past involving much tragedy, and its solitary location on the outskirts of the village had brought it great infamy.

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It was late at night by the time we managed to bring Nischay back to the relative safety of his home. Some time later, we assembled in the porch outside the house and sat down to a simple dinner that Mrs Panda had prepared. Her afflicted son had relapsed into his usual passive state. A few neighbours and friends of the family had come over to visit the young man and enquire about his condition. They now sat with us.

During the meal, Panda introduced us to the legend associated with the tree, never allowing his voice to rise above a whisper.

'I don't know much about it,' he began, 'but I did hear that many years

ago, a boy had committed suicide by hanging himself from the tree. He had failed in some exam, which made him take this drastic step. Unable to bear the tragic manner of his passing, the boy's grief-stricken father died soon after.'

'You are right,' an old man among the visitors interjected. 'It's a Saptaparni tree. They always bear a curse, but this one, in particular, is marked by the spirit of that poor boy who killed himself. In fact, we call it the "suicide tree" now. And following that tragedy, three more boys were found dead at that spot. All had hanged themselves from the tree. I can't help wondering, though, why such happy, hale and hearty lads would suddenly decide to take their lives.'

'But how can a tree…' I began.

'You have no idea what it can do!' the old man said. 'Do you know what the British used to call it? The Devil's Tree! What more do you need as proof? Even in colonial times, the tree struck terror in the hearts of those *firang*s. But our tree surpasses all others.'

'In what way?' I asked.

'Son, believe me, even walking on the path that goes past that tree is dangerous,' the man replied with the air of someone who knew more than most. 'People have heard voices there. Things fall from above just like that. No one from our village goes that way. God knows why this wretched fellow went there.'

'Has anyone actually seen anything there?' I asked.

'Yes!' another middle-aged man replied with a nod. 'Our postman, Ganga Ram, has. At the time, he had been newly appointed here and was unaware of the tree's history. Once, he was passing by the spot and paused near the tree to relieve himself. When he turned, he found a dark-complexioned boy staring at him. Ganga Ram even scolded the boy for having no manners and intruding on his private space. Then he noticed the boy's eyes – they were blood red, not the eyes of a human being at all. Realizing that this was a spirit, Ganga Ram immediately zipped up and fled the place.'

'Maybe Ganga Ram was spared because he is not so young,' the old neighbour remarked. 'The tree only seems to be after young, able-bodied boys and men.'

'So why has nothing been done about it as yet?' I asked.

At that moment, the old man was seized by a fit of coughing. When it was over, he begged my pardon and said, 'Oh, we tried! A few years ago, the village even decided to chop down the tree. But no one would dare do it alone. Finally, a large group of men, armed with axes, approached the tree and began hacking away at it.

'The trunk, however, would simply not yield to the blows. The men went back, defeated, deciding to return with heavier implements. But that never happened. By the next morning, all those men had fallen ill.

Without any apparent reason, they were vomiting foul green stuff. The village quickly understood that this was nothing but the outcome of a curse the tree had put on them.'

'All the men were affected?' I asked, incredulous.

'Yes. All twenty-one of them!'

'Oh, no!' Panda broke in now, 'Please save my son from that tree!' He was in tears.

'Has Nischay ever gone anywhere near the tree?' I asked him.

'He might have,' he replied between sobs. 'He has never had any reason to do so. But who knows…who knows where a young lad of his age wanders…'

'Has he ever run up to the tree before, as he did today?'

Panda shook his head. 'No. Today was the first time.'

I concluded I had heard enough. It was time for action. Rising swiftly to my feet, I reassured the people assembled there, 'Our team will look into this. Don't worry.'

'It's by god's infinite grace that you were here today. Or who knows what could have happened? How would I have stopped Nischay single-handedly? And if I hadn't, I might have found him dangling from the tree tomorrow morning,' Panda said

'Be strong,' I urged him. 'Nothing that dire has happened yet. We will undertake a thorough investigation of this tree tonight itself. Now we must take your leave.'

The old neighbour gave us directions to the tree, and then he added, rather ominously, 'Just be careful. You are all young men too. Perfect prey for the tree.'

With that terrifying warning ringing in our ears and another glance at the immobile Nischay, we left the Panda house.

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By the time the four of us had driven up to the highway, it had turned pitch dark. Along with me were Shiva and Savio, who would be operating the cameras, and Mason, who had taken up the responsibility of the audio devices. The road ahead of us was a stretch of the same highway we had travelled down earlier, the one that led to Bhubaneswar.

The forest lay on the other side. Devoid of any illumination, other than the beams of our vehicle's headlights, the entire place appeared more forbidding. This also made it more difficult for us to figure out what direction the boy had taken on his blind run up to the tree.

'We need to enter the forest,' I said. 'I think the tree is in that direction.'

Parking our car, we crossed the highway and entered the forested area ahead. We found ourselves on a mud path cleared by pedestrians and

animals that had passed that way during the day. Training the beam of our flashlights on the path and keeping an eye out for snakes and scorpions, we walked to the sound of our laboured breathing and twigs and dried leaves crunching underfoot.

We had walked about ten minutes along the path, but were nowhere near the tree, when something brought me to a halt. I cannot say what it was, but it was almost a physical force, as if a huge ball had hit me in the gut. I had felt only the impact, though, no pain. And there was nothing visible anywhere.

'This is the place we have to investigate first,' I announced.

My crew was flummoxed.

'But the tree isn't here,' Savio observed, trying to understand my point.

'There is something here,' I insisted. 'I can feel it.'

'Well, you're the leader,' he said. 'We'll do as you say.'

The team stopped and awaited my instructions.

I walked on slowly and began to examine the path. We had come a significant distance by now, and the path was barely visible. Not a soul was in sight.

'The tree is to our left, isn't it?' I asked Savio.

He nodded.

I took two steps in that direction and felt the cloud of negativity surrounding me becoming denser. I was in the grip of something inexplicable.

I turned back to the path. Realizing that I had to feel whatever it was, be one with it and communicate with it, I sat down on the path, oblivious to the muddy ground. I crossed my legs, shut my eyes and continued to sit there, trying to feel the vibrations of the place. The crew did not utter a word. They were probably watching my every move.

After a brief while, I asked, 'Is someone watching us?'

The moment I uttered the words, the surrounding darkness deepened to a degree which hadn't seemed possible earlier. It took us a few moments to realize what had happened. Until then, the faint glow from some of the streetlights on the highway had been filtering into the forest. They seemed to have been suddenly extinguished, plunging us into a suffocating darkness. Later, we were told that the village had experienced a power outage at that precise moment.

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I rose to my feet right away. Quickly, I instructed my team to fetch the devices. Savio handed me a K2 meter and a PIR sensor,* retaining a full-spectrum camera for himself. Shiva held a temperature sensor. Mason took care of the spirit box, a device that is especially designed by our

team.

We stood absolutely still for a few minutes. I gestured to the others to turn off their flashlights. Spirits sometimes take time to communicate. They might perceive us as threats to their habitat and will try to gauge our intentions before they manifest in any manner.

Standing in the darkness with only the display lights of our devices illuminating our faces, we might have presented a surreal sight to an accidental onlooker. But I admit with absolute honesty that fear was beginning to grip us too.

We stood in that manner for five minutes, as still as it was possible for us to be. I was sensing something, certainly, but I hadn't yet felt its full impact. Deciding, finally, that the presence could be stronger if we approached the tree, I gestured to my team to start walking.

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As we progressed, a frenzied rustling began among the leaves on the higher branches of the trees around us. I need to point out here that the night was utterly still, undisturbed by a breeze. But there it was now, the rustling overhead and quite audible it was too. It was so dark that we couldn't see what it was, but it appeared as if something was following us from above.

Then Mason jumped with surprise. Something seemed to have rushed past him. He pointed to a space on the ground, unable to utter a word.

'What is it, Mase?' I asked.

'I don't know!' he exclaimed, the tremor of fear in his voice chilling us to the bone. 'Something soft touched my leg and ran… Maybe, an animal… At least, I hope it was an animal…'

He continued to stare ahead, in the direction that the nameless, faceless thing had gone. I quickly shone my flashlight at the spot. And I did see something! As my light beam penetrated the distant darkness, I discerned a shadowy presence disappearing into the tree trunks.

Grasping my K2 meter, I pointed it at the spot. 'What are you?' I asked aloud.

The thing had vanished in a trice, but its lingering presence was still evident.

Keeping my eye on the single, steady light of the K2 meter, I moved ahead. Gingerly, I proceeded towards the tree trunks. The others followed, Savio, with his night-vision camera on, keeping closest to me.

'Don't worry,' I said, speaking to the unknown entity, trying to keep my voice as calm and steady as possible. 'We won't encroach your space. We are just a group of friends walking about.'

I had taken about ten steps forward, when something strange happened. There was a mild flickering of the third light on the meter. I

stopped, took a deep, but silent breath and indicated the fluctuation to Savio. His mouth fell open.

'Do you live on the tree?' I asked, getting more breathless by the minute.

The blinking of the light was rapid now… The excitement generated by that moment was unparalleled. There was something out there, for sure, and it was even trying to communicate! I could still feel its aura around the place, and it had little to do with the light indicators on my device. But I wanted to know more. Motioning Savio to follow, I took a few more cautious steps ahead, treading as silently as possible.

As soon as I had reached the cluster of trees, I said, 'I know you are here. I know you want to talk to us, or you would have run away. Could you give me a sign?'

My eyes were riveted on the tree trunks. I was hoping to see something emerge from there, the dark shadow, perhaps? I was so deeply engrossed in my experience that I jumped when Savio tapped me on the shoulder.

He was pointing at the device in my hand.

I looked at it then and was aghast – a third light was now steady, steady as a bulb. This could not be happening!

Almost simultaneously, I heard a low, hollow growl. It sounded like a wounded animal, but there was something unearthly about it. I stiffened immediately, anticipating some kind of attack. And then I realized the sound was not coming from ahead, but from the clearing behind me. I turned quickly and saw that the source of the sound was Shiva.

Shiva, our second camera guy, who had been about ten feet behind me all this while, now lay on the ground, groaning. He looked as if he was hurt. My first thought was that he had tripped and fallen, but as I moved closer to him, I found myself again in the same cloud of despair.

'Oh my god!' I exclaimed.

Images of poor Nischay lying almost lifeless on his bed hit me with full force. Was something similar happening to Shiva too? I was now beset with anxiety about the fate of my team member.

As I went up to observe him closely, Savio held me back. 'Look!' he whispered.

A shiver ran down my spine as I saw it – a billowing shadow loomed over Shiva. It wasn't quite a shadow in the sense that it lacked the sharp, finite edges of one. This was a nebulous black haze. Even against the pitch black of the forest, this shape stood out.

'*You cannot do this*!' I commanded, suddenly remembering that I was the leader of this group and, therefore, responsible for everything that was happening at this spot. 'Whatever you are, back off! Leave my friend alone!'

Whether owing to that bold display of aggression or not – I will never

know – all of us saw that haze dissipating. It faded away and the next moment, it wasn't there at all.

Almost at that very instant, the usual forest sounds were audible again, as if they had been on hold – the buzz of nocturnal insects, the calls of rodents, the hooting of a faraway owl. It was as if the forest had come alive again.

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In the silence that ensued following that blood-curdling experience, the four of us fell into a huddle for a quick meeting. Shiva and Mason were both of the opinion that they had had enough for one night and that we should turn back. But Savio and I disagreed. When the argument went on, I had to reassure my team.

'Look, guys,' I said, stepping up. 'We must remember that we have come here with a purpose. There is a young man out there in the village who lies in his father's arms like a statue and is close to being dead. The villagers believe that a great many of their problems stem from the tree. Like it or not, they have pinned their hopes on us. We cannot leave them in the lurch now, especially when we have seen something and should be following up on it. And we have yet to investigate the tree.'

'But after what happened…' Mason tried to say.

'Of course, such things will happen!' I countered, trying hard to keep my temper in check. 'Did you think paranormal investigations were a fun ride in the park? We are dealing with things that are not known to any man. There is, of course, danger.'

I saw the fear on their faces. My words weren't making an impact. Also, I knew that fear is the greatest weakness when it comes to the paranormal. Once you succumb to fear, everything is lost.

'Well, if that's how you feel, I won't force you to come along,' I said. 'But I'm asking you guys to stay here together. I shall go ahead alone and check out the place. Then we can go back together. Is that all right?'

Savio stepped forward, 'I'm coming with you,' he said.

'It's better if you stay with these two for the moment, Savio,' I told him. 'We are plumb in the middle of the forest now. It's not a good idea to leave them alone in this state. I will return shortly.'

Without waiting for any further remonstrations, I turned and started walking deeper into the forest.

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I walked alone for a quarter of an hour, deep in the heart of nowhere. It was so dark that looking up, I could not even see the branches of the trees. The only thing that gave me a semblance of reassurance was the moonlight that occasionally filtered down through the gaps between

those branches and patterned the ground in patches. And in that moonlight, I could see my shadow looming large on the ground, moving beside me, my only companion.

My senses were on high alert. The forest sounds were quite faint here; I could have clearly heard the faintest rustle of leaves or the softest footstep falling on the mud. Every now and then, I would think I had heard something and turn around to look.

My friends couldn't be blamed for the way they felt. This was a terrifying scenario. Out in an unfamiliar forest at night, knowing that there was something unnatural lurking about was far from reassuring. And there was a tree somewhere which apparently drove people to kill themselves! It was not something most people would be able to take with equanimity.

But where was the tree? Had I lost my sense of direction? Maybe, I had. I decided then to turn around and see if I had strayed.

That was when I noticed something that made the hair bristle on the nape of my neck.

The moment I turned, I sensed something unnatural. It was my shadow. It should have turned with me too. But it didn't! My mouth running dry, I raised an arm and held it above my head. But there it was – the shadow of my arm didn't rise.

Then, before I could react, the entire shadow vanished. It was gone, as if someone had swooped down and plucked it out.

I was now a man without a shadow. I wasn't casting any shadow on the ground! You have no idea how spine-chilling the experience can be, until you go through it.

Utterly bewildered now, I turned full circle, minutely observing everything around me. That's when I noticed that nothing else was casting a shadow there – neither the trees nor the rocks. It took me a moment to understand the reason: the moon was right overhead.

But what, then, was that shadow I had just seen? It had been there, moving beside me along the ground, bearing my shape, although somewhat distorted. What *had* that been? I had been subconsciously watching it as I walked, as it bobbed up and down on the ground ahead of me, *leading me here*…

Then realization struck – that hadn't been my shadow at all! That thing, which I had mistaken for my shadow, had been something else.

I ran all the way back to where my team was waiting. The realization that the mysterious thing had been so close to me had rendered me speechless with fear. Had it already affected me in a way I wasn't yet aware of? I could feel it, then, the pall of gloom that was enveloping me – the hallmark of an evil spirit.

I reached my team, cut and bruised in multiple places, though I have no idea how I sustained those injuries. My three colleagues stared at me

in horror. Then Savio stretched out his hand, pointing to something behind me. His mouth formed a single word: 'Look.'

Very slowly, taking care not to make any sudden, jerky movements, I turned. Somewhere behind me, in the space between the forked branches of a not-so-distant tree hovered two faint red circles. My breath caught in my throat as I realized what they were – eyes.

They were looking back at us. At *me*.

And then they vanished.

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'Have you guys made up your mind?' I asked when I had got my breath back again.

'We had a talk after you spoke to us,' said Shiva, 'and decided you were right. For a moment there, we had forgotten what we had signed up for. We are with you.'

'Are you sure? Mase, you?'

'Yes, Sarbajeet. I'm frightened as hell, but I am also curious. I'd be an idiot to pass up this chance after coming this far.'

'We are with you all the way,' Savio added.

'Great!' I cracked a smile. 'Because heaven knows I need you guys!'

It was time to move towards the tree that had been causing such trouble in the Panda household. I left the navigation to Savio, for he has a hound-like talent for following the scent, as it were, and sniffing out places.

After walking for a few minutes, with the others following close behind, he came to an abrupt halt. Then with a triumphant smile lighting up his face, he pointed ahead. The tree was right there in front of us, its branches sprawling all over the place. It was a complete enigma as to why I hadn't been able to trace it earlier. It was right where the Pandas' old neighbour had said it would be. The tree was the only one growing on a barren patch of land, just as the man had described it.

Almost wonderstruck, I approached it now, well aware of the stories it had spawned. I thought of all the young men who had been lured here for some reason and then compelled to end their lives. I tried to visualize their bodies hanging from the boughs. What was in there that was so evil?

As if to uphold its sinister reputation, the tree looked like something out of a dark fantasy movie, its gnarled branches forming a canopy over us that gave it a look of abundance. Yet, not a single leaf or flower grew on those branches.

'What happened to the tree?' Savio wondered aloud.

His concern was justified. All the other trees beyond this circular path were lush with leaves and flowers. This particular one, however, despite

its generous canopy, was barren, stripped of foliage and blossoms. It almost looked dead.

I stepped back a bit and noticed something else about the tree bark: it bore numerous sharp cuts, their edges ragged and dangerous looking. They were testimony to the locals' unsuccessful attempts to chop down the tree. It also confirmed to us that this was the same tree we were looking for.

Truth be told, those deep incisions on its bark made me feel for the wounded tree. While there were tragic stories in plenty about the ill-fated young men who had met with death, who knew what agony the tree itself had endured over the ages?

My crew had gathered around me now, observing me as I touched the bark tenderly, trying to sense its pain. My fingers moved gently over the splintered edges of those cuts and I found myself wanting to communicate with the tree. However, that was not to be.

Perhaps, the tree resented my touch. My fingers were on a particular spot on the bark when, suddenly, I received a terrific jolt, very like an electric shock.

I stepped back at once. 'No one's to touch the tree!' I warned the others.

It was unlikely that anyone would have, anyway.

'I know you are here,' I said aloud. 'I don't know who you are, but you must know that I don't mean any harm. Are you the one who has been following me?'

I waited for a few moments. There was no response.

'I want to know,' I insisted. 'Who are you? Did you also commit suicide here? Or were you killed? Give me a sign.'

I was hoping for too much. Evidently, this was a highly obstinate spirit. The only way to deal with it was to maintain an equal level of obstinacy, while staying within the limits of courtesy.

'Tell me if you are still here,' I said. 'I will wait.'

Without even being aware of it, we were holding our breath as we waited for a response. Our ears were alert, ready to catch the remotest sound. And then we heard a faint crunch.

It was the sound of a twig snapping, as if someone had stepped on it.

The others quickly drew as close to me as possible. The sound seemed to come from outside the circular patch that surrounded this tree. I tried to focus on the spot from which I believed the sound had come.

The next sound came from above us; it was the sound of a branch, a *heavy* one, snapping off right overhead. There was no time to lose. In a swift reflex movement, I sprang sideways and fell, trying to dodge whatever was about to land on my head. There was a loud crash, seconds after I had moved from the spot. I now found myself lying on the ground, looking back at the spot I had hastily vacated. But nothing

seemed to have happened. Something very strange was going on here. I had felt the tree shake. I had clearly heard something snapping off. Something *had* fallen. I had heard the resounding crash.

'Did you…did you all hear the crash?' I asked my team.

But the group stood looking at me, bewildered and fearful. They had not moved an inch from where they stood. They had evidently heard nothing. It was just my imagination. I realized, then, that what had been on display, mere seconds ago, was this malevolent spirit's mind-bending tricks. Perhaps, he had resorted to them earlier in his quest to take the lives of all those unfortunate young men. The spirit was, indeed, a dangerous one. It had decided to toy with us; of that I was certain. This spirit was as dangerous as it can get in the paranormal world.

I had to step up.

'Listen,' I said clearly. 'I know who you are. I know that a terrible tragedy befell you at this place. I know that you killed yourself here – '

But my words trailed off. I had noticed something shaking above my head again. It was a heavy branch. It could have been my imagination, yet again, but I did not want to take any chances. Once again, I swerved sideways – and saved my skin in the nick of time. Seconds later, a loud crash shook the ground.

'Oh my god!' Savio exclaimed, holding me by the arm this time. 'That could have killed you!'

There was, indeed, a branch on the ground, one as big as me. I was quite sure, then, that the tree hadn't simply shed a rotting branch.

I cautiously approached the branch, gesturing to the others to follow me at a distance and sat down near it. Meditatively, I shut my eyes and stretched out my arm. I placed the palm of my hand on the branch. This object had been manipulated by the entity. I was sure it bore a clue of some kind.

But the question was – would it convey that to me?

'What happened to you is tragic,' I said softly, now sensing the entity close to me and certain that it could hear. 'But what you are doing now is unjust. You have to overcome your sorrow and hatred and allow that young man to regain his health.'

Since my eyes were closed, I could not see what was going on in the physical world around me, but my intention was to sense the other world, the world we usually cannot see. I concentrated with as much intensity as I could muster and tried to commune with the tree. I had gone in deep, when a strange series of visuals presented themselves to me.

Savio told me later that I had gone into a trance. They had tried to shake me awake, but I was in some deep stupor from which I would not awaken. But what I saw in that state was quite vivid.

A boy approaches the tree…climbs up on a branch…ties a noose on a

higher branch… He places the noose around his neck.

He pauses, hesitates. Tears well up in his eyes… He shakes his head. Regret is written all over his face… He tries to unfasten the noose.

But he fumbles and misses… Then stumbles and falls…

The noose tightens around his neck.

His body goes limp…

'You wanted to live!' I exclaimed, my eyes wide open now. 'I saw it happen… You changed your mind at the last moment. You wanted to live.'

As soon as I uttered these words, it was as if the gloom had lifted. Everything was clearer.

'You did not kill yourself,' I went on. 'You feel the tree killed you and it makes you angry. But now we know…we know how you died. And we will share the truth with people.'

The gloom lifted even further. Experiencing the subsequent lightness of being was a unique sensation. All through our time in the forest, we had been in the grip of emotions weighing us down, but as the scene of the fatal moment in the deceased boy's life became clear and I articulated them openly, I felt a kind of release too, as if I were recovering from an illness I hadn't even known I was suffering from.

At that moment, the ground began to vibrate. It was a thrumming sound and it came from somewhere very close by; it came from the peripheries of the circular patch around the tree. I sprang to my feet and pointed at the edge of the circle. I noticed that my finger was trembling.

A rustling sound began at the edge. From that spot emerged something dark, the same black haze we had seen earlier. It was moving. And it was trying to draw closer to us.

At the same time, we felt a strong, unexpected wind beginning to blow in our direction. It was cold and sinister, even unearthly. It felt like no ordinary wind; it seemed as if a plague were headed our way. And it came laden with dust and dried leaves that blew into our faces.

'Wh-what's happening?' someone asked.

I think it was Mason.

'Stop it!' I said. 'Why are you doing this?'

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the bizarre gust died away. Everything returned to its original state of calm.

'He's gone,' I said. 'I can sense it. He has found his peace, now that we know the truth about how he died. With that truth known to all, his death and, therefore, his life, will acquire a new dignity.'

In the dead of night, we sat under the very tree that had been feared for years by the entire town and performed an elaborate metaphysical cleansing ritual. It was carried out so that the soul of the boy who had died in a tragic accident would find peace, instead of lingering in this realm where he no longer belonged. It went on for two hours. By the

time we were done, the sun was coming up to announce the dawn of a new day.

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We remained in Bhadrak until the following evening. The Pandas were good enough to host us. For a while, I turned caregiver for Nischay, observing his condition minutely. He lay still most of the morning, but there was a time when he briefly sat up and looked around the room. I noticed an animated expression in his eyes that hadn't been there the previous day. Panda shared no conclusive observations with me at the time, but I did notice him heave a sigh of relief.

The big test would come in the evening. We waited out on the porch. Our eyes were on the time. When it turned 7.30, everyone froze, standing utterly still. We could see Nischay from the window of the house. And as the minutes passed and nothing untoward happened, the beating of our hearts returned to a normal rhythm.

Panda came rushing out, his expression one of elation.

'He is fine!' he exclaimed, unable to contain his joy. 'Nothing untoward happened to my boy today! Even the colour has returned to his cheeks. Whatever you did in the forest, it worked!'

That was all I wanted to hear. Our efforts had not been in vain.

Reflecting on our experience in the forest, however, I felt that we had run a huge risk.

Like the earthly world of human beings, the paranormal world is, after all, populated with all kinds of entities. As in our own world, where benevolent individuals co-exist with evil ones and with those with shades of grey, in the alternate world of spirits too, there is good and evil and everything in between.

I have discovered that as an investigator of this parallel world, courage is the one quality you need to have in abundance. Had I been lacking in it and reacted in any other way on the night of our visit to the accursed tree in the forest, there is no way of telling what might have transpired. I knew, for instance, that it was necessary for me to make it clear to the dead boy's restless spirit that I wasn't afraid of him. At the same time, I wanted to reassure it that I wasn't a threat. And that is what I feel worked in my favour.

When I am called in to investigate situations where such spirits are involved, I find it hard to fathom the kind of pain they harbour within themselves. I try to gauge how that pain must have been festering within them for centuries, with the entities fully aware that there is nothing they can do about the cruel state of existence they are trapped in. I certainly felt the pain the boy's spirit at the accursed tree was going through on that fateful night in Bhadrak. We, as human beings, are not,

unfortunately, empowered to alleviate that pain. All we can do is hope that these spirits find their release in some manner, instead of wreaking vengeance on our world for the pain they suffered.

# 6

# HOUSE OF BONES

*Near Kolkata, 2016*

'A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, there were lavish parties and dance performances here all through the night,' Mohsin, the caretaker of the old courthouse, told us when we landed up at the place for an investigation for our show. 'It is said that the celebrations would keep the villagers awake all night.

'The place is deathly silent now. Not a soul ventures here after dark. Even during the day, there's hardly anyone around other than the stray traveller and daring people like you. Yes, you are right – this place does bear the reputation of being haunted.'

And well it might, I thought. The palatial mansion of a wealthy landowner in its heyday, now uninhabited for the last hundred years, the old courthouse stood in a secluded spot, well off the beaten track. A few of the older locals still reminisced about its glorious past and how the place had been the talk of the town during the colonial era. Within these palatial premises, trials were held for matters such as tax evasion and petty local crimes, which earned it the name of *Kacheri Badi*, the courthouse. The zamindar, the occupant of this mansion, adjudicated these trials. Now all that remained of the opulent premises were desolate ruins. Simply entering the place demanded all the courage an intrepid trespasser could muster, along with the blessings of his collective gods. And as is bound to happen with abandoned places that have spawned an intriguing local legend, many yarns had been spun about the courthouse as well, most of them tinged with the colour of blood.

Now alert to Mohsin's inputs about the place, I asked, 'Haunted in what sense? What exactly goes on here?'

'There are thousands of little things, but most prominent among them is the story of the Dancing Lady.'

'The Dancing Lady? Go on.'

'The locals insist that she is the spirit of one of the resident dancers of the landowner who lived here. Both he and his ancestors were brutal, debauched men. Drunk with power and the wealth that their unjustly levied taxes brought in, they had unleashed a reign of terror across this region, especially targeting the local women. They would abduct these

women, bring them by force to this place and confine them here. The hapless women were also coerced into giving dance performances for the landlord and his intoxicated friends for whom such nights of revelry and debauchery were an indispensable feature of the entertainment organized on these premises. If the captive women resisted their tormentors or attempted to escape from this place, they were killed. And if their family members dared protest against such atrocities, they were not spared either. None of them were ever found again.'

'Killed?' I asked. 'How were their bodies disposed of?'

'We discovered that only around twenty years ago,' Mohsin replied. 'It came as quite a shock to the entire village. A businessman who wanted to set up a rice mill here had bought the place. Workers came in to demolish this structure. Suddenly, there was a loud commotion. The workers had dug up a trench and discovered that it was packed with human bones.'

'Oh! So the corpses were buried here?'

'Evidently,' the caretaker said with a nod. 'Most of the bones were in fragments. Even trying to imagine what might have happened here is enough to make you shudder. Anyway, it was around that time that this place got its reputation of being haunted. The rice mill never came up. The people who had planned to set it up simply fled the place after the gruesome discovery.'

'Tell me more about this Dancing Lady,' I persisted.

Mohsin's face turned a shade paler. 'It is said that she was the most popular danseuse in the landowner's harem,' he began. 'Maybe, even his mistress. Perhaps, she was also killed, like many others. On most nights, she is still seen here. It seems she appears mostly to men, walking from one end of the corridor to the other. And once you've set eyes on her, you are doomed; your days are numbered. But she does give a warning when she approaches: you will hear the tinkle of the bells on her anklets. That is the signal for you to flee the place.'

'Do you know anyone who has actually seen her?'

'Yes,' Mohsin said, his head bowed.

'Who was it?'

'Twenty years ago, my Abbu saw her,' he elaborated. 'My father had never believed in all the stories circulating about her. One night, he came to the courthouse for something. When he returned home, he seemed to be in shock. Ammi tried asking him what had happened. All he would say was that he had seen a woman. The very next morning, he came down with a high fever and died not long after.'

'Oh, I am so sorry to hear that.'

'There have been other such instances,' Mohsin went on. 'And now the night is nearly upon us. We should not be here at all. It is dangerous, believe me.'

'It's all right,' I reassured him. 'This is our job; we investigate ghosts and spirits. Thank you for telling us about this place. If you would rather leave now, you may.'

Mohsin did not linger. Dusk had already set in. Leaving us alone with his ominous story and the subsequent warning, he hurried off home, distancing himself from the desolate location.

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For a long time now, the PAIRS team had been looking forward to investigating this notorious courthouse located in West Bengal, around 600 km from Kolkata. About 20 km from the site is a much-visited town, famous for its tantric shrine. It is also reputed to be an abode for those dabbling in mysticism and the occult, who believe they have special powers to exorcise evil spirits from possessed humans. This has further enhanced the town's popularity, drawing simple, gullible folk from neighbouring areas.

The courthouse, whose main gate we now stood in front of, following its caretaker's hasty departure at sundown, had been well documented as a haunted location – the very reason for piquing our interest. The house itself, which was, indeed, like a palace, stood approximately a hundred steps away from the main gate. The space in between was overgrown with weeds and shrubs and looked very much like a favoured abode for poisonous reptiles and insects.

The team, this time, included Savio, Shiva, and me. Our first step, as we set out on our investigation, was to click and send several pictures of the premises to Pooja, whose ability to sense what lies beyond the merely visible had astounded us on many previous occasions and helped shed light on several cases. We were hoping her insights on this particular case would be equally useful. I sent her six pictures – one, of the view from the main gate and the others of the building from different angles. Her response came twenty minutes later.

Her phone call was to set the tone of things to come. Here, I must emphasize that Pooja had absolutely no prior knowledge of the courthouse's tainted history.

'Sarbajeet, it looks like someone used to live in this place, some kind of a maharaja,' she said with some hesitation, still in the midst of her reading. 'The place has a strong negative vibe. I can feel it even in these photographs. And hold on, there might be something here. Looks like a woman…'

I was instantly alert. This conversation strengthened my faith in Pooja's psychic powers.

'Woman? What kind of a woman?' I asked.

'I cannot tell for sure…but she looks like a beautiful young woman.

She is in despair. The negative energy is emanating from her.'

As I walked towards the house, she went on, 'Hang on, Sarbajeet. I see something else in these pictures. Did some kind of musical and dance performance take place here?'

I stopped in my tracks. How did she know about the music and dance?

'It's a very dangerous place,' Pooja went on. 'Oh my god! There are human remains here!'

She was spot on! The caretaker's words about the discovery of human bones in this place some twenty years ago were still ringing in my ears.

'What human remains?' I asked, probing further to gauge how much she could sense about the place.

'Bones. I see bones. There is a well somewhere…'

I hadn't noticed any well around the place. I looked at Shiva and Savio; they too shook their heads.

'Take care, you guys,' said Pooja. 'Be safe and keep me posted.'

Still shaking from the impact of her terrifyingly accurate reading, I hung up. I had sensed real fear in Pooja's voice. Though it seemed she had told us everything she could sense from the photographs I'd sent her, I was not sure if her words had done justice to what she had actually seen in those photographs.

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By the time we were set up, it was around 9.30 p.m. Our entire surroundings were submerged in darkness. With no human presence nearby, we were at the mercy of nature's elements.

Our paraphernalia included cameras at vantage points on the courthouse's ground floor. While the crew had been setting them up, I had taken a quick look around the place. The courthouse had two floors and a terrace above them. As is typical of such grand old mansions, each floor accommodated several rooms. Though they were in a shambles by now and difficult to examine in the pitch darkness, even the ruins bore the stamp of the place's former splendour.

I took my time to scan the top floor. Parts of it had collapsed over time. Some portions of the floor tiles were in a precarious condition; even the slightest pressure on them would have sent them plummeting down to the lower floor. With the help of fluorescent chalk, I marked out these loose floor portions as a reminder to our team to stay away from them during the investigation.

While I was occupied with this work, I felt a slow chill creep into my bones. This struck me as decidedly odd. This was the month of April, after all, and we were in the middle of one of the sultriest summers Odisha had experienced in a while. Why, then, was I shivering?

Quickly, I returned to the ground floor and picked up the infrared thermometer. Alongside, I checked the town's temperature on the mobile app. That was when we registered the first real shock the night held for us.

The temperature, as recorded by the infrared thermometer in my hand, was a solid two degrees lower than the town's temperature. So I had not imagined the chill in my bones.

Shiva was operating the K2 meter as he scoured the various portions of the ground floor, keeping an eye out for the slightest fluctuation in the lights. He shook his head at me as he came out. I instructed him to keep all the devices in one corner, as we would not be needing them that night.

The truth is, Savio and I had a different plan for this particular investigation. We had recently created an innovative paranormal investigation device – the PAIRS Spirit Box. This ingenious little creation had been built in collaboration with paranormal experts from two other countries – Brian Holloway of the United Kingdom and Javier Satz of Spain. It is fed with a specific selection of Sanskrit verses that we spliced into small fragments and reversed. Our hope was that spirits would be able to pick and choose syllables from these fragments and throw them back at us in the form of intelligible words. It was a tall order, but if spirits were assumed to have any rational thought, it would aid them in communication with the world of the living.

This was the perfect location to put our special gadget to use. Keeping all other devices aside, we took out the Spirit Box and positioned it at a prominent location on the grounds. Then we huddled around it like children attracted to a shiny new toy.

Only I knew how dangerous this could be. I was fully aware of the extent of precision the Spirit Box could communicate with. If it truly worked the way we intended it to, we were in for one of the most hair-raising experiences of our career.

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Taking the lead, I nodded at the others to take up their positions. Then, ensuring that the Spirit Box was well within our range of vision, I said loudly and clearly, 'Is there anyone here with us?'

Stark silence was the only response.

It did not upset me, though. Paranormal investigation is a game of infinite patience. It is akin to finding the proverbial needle in a haystack. Most times, you will come up with only hay, never realizing that you might have come close to the needle several times during your search. But on that rare occasion, you will find the needle and those are the times that make the entire search worth it. The point is to keep looking.

I had to persist. I asked the same question in many different ways. It was on my seventh reiteration of the question that the Spirit Box produced a faint whirr.

All of us turned to look at it. An almost chaotic disturbance had started in the machine. We cocked our ears to listen and, amid the noise, heard a male voice uttering an indistinct set of words.

It sounded much like:

'*Aa…mi…jom…i…dar*'

What did they mean? Or was there a meaning?

And then, Shiva exclaimed loudly, 'I know what it means! It is in Bengali. *Ami Jomidar.* It means: "I am the zamindar."'

We were dumbfounded. Not only did the words make sense now, but they had been spoken in the language of the region – Bengali.

'You say you are the zamindar of this place?' I asked, keeping my voice firm and trying not to let my excitement get the better of me.

'*Hein*,' was the apparent reply. It meant 'yes' in Bengali.

That was great success in the context of a paranormal investigation. Two questions asked; both answered. I prepped myself to ask more.

'Do you still own this place after so many years?'

Once again, we heard the word that conveyed an affirmative reply: '*Hein*.'

'But that is not possible,' I said. 'What if I tell you that you don't own the place any more? What if I tell you that the place is mine?'

I knew I had just disturbed a hornet's nest. Entities are highly territorial; they cannot brook any trespassing on the abode they have claimed for themselves.

For a while, there was no reply, but the silence was heavy with tension.

I ventured again. 'I don't think you heard me,' I said. 'I said that this place is mine.'

What happened next was quite beyond my expectations. The moment I had uttered the provocative words, there was a mild, but perceptible tremor. It was difficult to determine if the tremor came from deep within the earth or the very structure of the building was shaking, but for a split second, it was as if we were in the grip of an earthquake.

'Are you the one doing this?' I yelled, even as the tremors began to subside. 'Give me some sign if it's you…'

Almost as if in response to my words, Shiva called out, 'Sarbajeet! Look here!'

He had gone back to check on the devices and was now holding up the infrared thermometer for my benefit. When I saw the reading, my jaw nearly dropped: there was a further dip of almost three degrees in the temperature.

What was happening in this place defied all logical explanation.

In many situations, critics of the paranormal world attribute such instances to mere coincidence. And had I not been in the thick of this investigation and several similar ones, I'd probably have done the same. It is only when you are present at the site of paranormal activity and in a position to witness such phenomena at first hand that your conviction grows about these occurrences having no logical explanation whatsoever.

Standing in that courthouse now, it was abundantly clear to me that the spirit of the landowner – for that was how it was presenting itself – wasn't a benevolent entity. On the contrary, it was making every attempt to toy with us. After several exchanges, I decided our communication was leading us nowhere. I had to change track.

'This is not leading us anywhere,' I announced to my team. 'Locals have reported seeing a woman. We need to find her.'

We had already scanned the ground floor of the courthouse. It was time to go upstairs now. It was there that I expected to encounter the infamous ghost of the Dancing Lady.

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We made our way upstairs, leaving a motion camera on the ground floor to record any untoward movement. We were careful not to tread on any of the previously marked loose tiles.

Taking up position, I looked around me. If the place had had a sinister feel to it earlier, it now seemed decidedly ominous, with its dark and clammy atmosphere, as if it had been dragged right out of the guts of a beast. With the air chilly and oppressive at the same time, all three of us were drawing laboured breaths within minutes, which heightened our feeling of claustrophobia and exhaustion.

'Are you here?' I asked, my voice firm. 'I am speaking to you, lady. Many have seen you, but will you show yourself to us tonight?'

I did not expect an answer and there was none. All we could hear were regular nocturnal sounds.

'Please tell me if you are here,' I went on in a gentler, more persuasive tone. 'I understand that you have had a difficult life. I come as a friend.'

This time, I heard a faint sound. I turned at once to see what had caused it. There was a little pebble lying on the floor behind me. I could have sworn it hadn't been there before.

I cautiously approached the pebble. It was a clear white, with rounded edges, the kind you might find in a fish tank. For a moment, I was wary of touching it, for it looked different from the rest of the materials used in the building's construction or even from anything seen in those parts.

'Was it you who did this?' I asked. 'Give me a sign if you did.'

Suddenly, my attention was drawn to another corner of the hall. And

there, to my great surprise, was another similar pebble; only that was black in colour. Like the first pebble, this one too did not look like it belonged there.

Holding both pebbles in my hands now, I said, 'See, lady, this pebble game is fine, but it is not going to lead us anywhere. I need a clear sign.'

There was no response whatsoever. Now, one valuable input I have received from senior paranormal experts is that we need to show entities the path we want them to take. Since they cannot 'discover' things for themselves, our instructions have to be very specific.

With that in mind, I dropped the pebbles and stretched out my arm.

'Look,' I said, 'look at my hand. I will hold it outstretched like this. If you are here and are interested in communicating with us, all you have to do is touch my hand.'

You can well imagine my state of mind here: I was standing on the upper floor now, poised on one of the firmer tiles of the almost-dilapidated building, with my hand outstretched, inviting a spirit to touch me! Who knew what might happen? After all, truly bizarre things had been taking place all around me. On top of that, the cold was really getting to me now. And the memories of those spine-chilling tales the caretaker had left me with did not help matters.

Hardly had a minute passed since I stretched my hand out for a sign from the entity when something made me scream like a frightened child. It was the peculiar sensation on my hand: of something cold and furry, like the paw of a wild bear. I jerked my head around to look; there was nothing. As a sudden chill ran down my spine, I asked Shiva to check my body temperature. He pointed the infrared thermometer at my arm.

It was then that I discovered the room's temperature had dropped by a yet another three degrees.

This was insane! How many more feelers did we need, I asked myself, to prove that there was, indeed, the presence of something here that belonged to a realm beyond our own? What annoyed me, however, were the games being played; the entities were deliberately remaining hidden, simply because we were so keen to see them.

'Come on, lady!' I challenged again. 'Enough of these games. You have shown yourself to so many other people. Why the reluctance to appear before us? We are here to set your troubled mind at rest.'

My entreaties were lost in the cold night air. I waited for one minute, two minutes, five minutes, thinking over what I could do next. I wanted something more than these signs now; I wanted a manifestation.

It was at this point that I set out to implement a seemingly absurd idea that had been on my mind.

While setting out for this place, I had carried a staff with me. The walking stick was an ancient relic, probably hundreds of years old and

just the kind of aid that royal elders might have used in a bygone era. My intention was to use this staff as a trigger object to force the ghost to manifest. To be honest, I had seen something similar being done in a movie. Since the emotional cloud pervading this place was so dense, I was becoming increasingly confident that my ploy would work.

I brought out the staff and raised it in the air, much like a wizard wielding a wand. Then I said in a voice deeper than my own, 'I know you are here. You cannot hide from me any longer. Do you know who I am? I am the zamindar.' And then, mimicking the voice I had heard earlier on the Spirit Box, I announced, *'Ami Jomidar.*'

With that, I struck the bottom end of the staff sharply against the floor.

'Did you hear me? *Ami Jomidar*!' I repeated in a louder voice, listening to it bounce back from the time-ravaged walls around me.

I paced around the room in the manner of an old aristocrat from days gone by rhythmically tapping the butt of the staff on the tiles that could bear the weight.

About two minutes into that ridiculous charade, there was a distinct sound. Savio heard it first and grasped me by the shoulder to draw my attention to it. We froze, our senses on high alert. And there it was:

A faint tinkling of anklet bells…

It was getting louder, approaching closer.

In a huddle now, Savio and I kept turning in every direction, our eyes darting to nooks and corners as we attempted to trace the source of the sound. It lasted for an entire minute, becoming more audible with every passing second. Then I felt that eerie sensation on my arm again, cold, sticky, yet, more palpable and persistent. It was as if a cold corpse had reached out and clamped down on my arm.

I jerked my arm away in revulsion and stared at it, overcome by fear and confusion. 'Someone touched me!' I exclaimed. 'Someone just touched my arm again!'

Within moments, I had come to grips with myself. 'You are here,' I stated. 'I know you are here now. I'm sorry that I acted as if I were the zamindar to draw you in. But you can share your problems with me. Did the zamindar torture you? Were you killed by him?'

Even as I was speaking, the tinkling sound of the anklets grew louder and the EVP recorder in Shiva's hand buzzed in tandem. Shiva set the recorder down on some kind of a table that was in the room and we paused to listen, our eyes widening in wonder.

There were repeated and discordant fragments of sound from the recorder that remained almost unintelligible.

'You have to give me the answers,' I repeated firmly, addressing the space around me.

At that precise moment, we heard a crash from the ground below.

What on earth was that? Savio and I spun around and raced downstairs, Shiva following close on our heels. The motion camera we had set up earlier now lay on the ground, its tripod damaged. A cloud of dust rose from a far corner near the compound wall that we had not explored as yet – a spot overgrown with bushes.

Highly intrigued by what we had witnessed, we emerged from the courthouse and approached the corner of the compound wall. Dust still hung in the air as we reached the spot.

Savio made his way into the bushes, his flashlight serving as his sole aid. I shouted out a warning to him, but it went unheeded. He walked about ten paces into the wild undergrowth, then stopped and focused the beam of his flashlight on the ground below.

'Here!' he called out to me. 'There is something here!'

We ventured to that spot in the tall grass to which the spirit had drawn our attention. Savio was looking down at the ground, his mouth agape. I followed the direction of his gaze and my mouth fell open too.

It was a round pit in the ground. Even a quick glance indicated that it ran quite deep. Darkness seemed to swallow the beams from our flashlights as we pointed them into this pit, but I did make out that it was filled with mud, dried leaves, debris and other forms of refuse.

'It's a well,' I said. 'A dried-up well.'

A frisson of excitement went through me as I recalled how Pooja, sitting hundreds of kilometres away, had mentioned the existence of a well – one moreover, that no one else seemed to know about – merely by looking at some pictures of the courthouse that I'd sent her. Perhaps, even the caretaker did not know about it? I marvelled at the psychic abilities of my partner.

I immediately rang up Pooja and put her on video call.

'Here it is, Pooja,' I said, 'the well you spoke about. No one knows about it. I am simply amazed by your powers and even a little afraid of you now.'

'Be careful, guys,' Pooja cautioned, her voice breaking due to poor reception. 'In that well lies great danger. Oh! There are bones in there! Bones, Sarbajeet, human bones! And, oh no…!'

'What is it?' I asked, holding my breath.

'Most of the bones are shattered and fragmented, but there's one particular skeleton that's still whole. Just one. It's of a woman. Sarbajeet…I think this is the skeleton of the woman ghost.'

There was a lot to ponder over now. Had the Dancing Lady led us to her physical remains? Did she want to be released and was the landowner refusing to let her go? It made sense. The landowner was probably holding her by force in the spiritual world, just as he had done in the earthly realm when they were both living.

What could we do to release one spirit from the clutches of another? How could I confront the zamindar's ghost? This called for a face-off. I was ready for a showdown, but that would mean endangering my team members and, perhaps, others in the village as well. That concern alone was holding me back now.

Having considered the problem from various angles, I concluded that the only way to achieve my goal was to offer myself to the zamindar's ghost.

In those moments of silence that Savio and I spent near the well, these were the thoughts running through my mind. The more I reflected on the matter, the more sense it made to me to venture forth alone. It was, as far as I could tell, the best way to go about resolving this situation.

'I am going to go ahead with a paranormal lockdown,' I announced to my teammates.

'Oh no, you aren't!' Savio said immediately.

'Please, no!' Shiva protested.

Their reactions were inevitable. A paranormal lockdown is a situation where the investigator is locked in a room which is believed to be haunted. Communication with the outside world is almost nil and hardly any equipment is used. It is tantamount to offering yourself to the entity to do its worst and observe the extent to which it can go. On the rare occasions that paranormal lockdowns have taken place, investigators are reported to have emerged from the experience as changed human beings, quite different from the individuals they used to be before they went in.

This extremely rare procedure is resorted to only when all other options have been exhausted; and only the most resolute investigators go ahead with it. It would be the first time for me, and I have not done it since.

'Are you nuts?' Savio said, outraged.

'Look, there is no other option,' I told him. 'I have to discover the full extent of what this entity is capable of. The spirit of the Dancing Lady has to be set free. I am sure you will agree that this situation cannot be allowed to go on forever. We're aware of innocent lives being lost because of the ongoing feud between the two spirits haunting this place.'

There was nothing further to discuss. My mind was made up. I chose a room on the upper floor that was closest to the hall where we had observed the most intense activity. It was also a room whose door and latch were still intact.

Before entering it, I said out loud to the spirit, 'I am now going into this room. My friends are going to bolt me in from outside. I shall have no means of escape. You, whoever you are, can come and do what you

wish with me. I am all yours now.'

Thus began one of the scariest episodes of my life as a paranormal investigator. I hoped the sound of my wildly beating heart wouldn't betray how terrified I was.

There was a slight sliver of light coming into the room from somewhere. The moment the door was shut, however, I was devoured by the most unrelenting darkness.

If I had felt a choking sensation outside, the feeling increased tenfold in this closed space, which was as stuffy as a crypt. It was clear that the room either had no windows or they had jammed from not being opened for years. The feeling of claustrophobia took its time to seep in; it sank slowly into the pores of my skin, making every nerve and fibre aware of the state of confinement I was in. For several moments, I could not even see my own hand. I did not know where I was stepping and it suddenly hit me that the fluorescent markings we had made on the loose tiles earlier were meaningless now. One misstep and I could fall through to the floor below and break my neck. Somewhere, I thought I heard a hissing sound and a new fear seized me: there might be snakes in here. To top it all, the air was dangerously musty and carried a strong whiff of mould. I was almost certain that even if I survived the lockdown, I could be ill and bedridden for a long time.

In that all-enveloping gloom, my mind was beginning to run riot. The bones in the well (which I hadn't actually seen, but could visualize clearly from Pooja's vivid description, almost as if I had actually stumbled upon them myself) were a chilling reminder of the torture that had been regularly inflicted on helpless and innocent people on this very premises. Their tormented screams as they breathed their last and the curses of the families whose loved ones had been held captive here rang in my ears. But the brutality of the feudal lord surpassed all else. How could a man be so drunk on power that he had no qualms at all about wreaking havoc with other human lives on a mere whim? What kind of a man could have hundreds killed and still sleep with a clear conscience? Perhaps, it was the reason why his soul hadn't found peace even after death.

'Are you here now?' I called out, anger whirling within me. 'I am not going to leave you in peace. If I am not able to take you out today, I shall keep coming back. You may be the spirit, but it is I who shall haunt you as long as I can. Bear that in mind.'

The minutes ticked by. I had no way of telling the time, but I think half an hour might have passed. I had adapted myself by now to the surrounding darkness, but the feeling of isolation began to weigh on me. It was easy to forget that my friends were there, just beyond the door. It did not seem to matter, really, for inside the locked room, it was like being in a totally different dimension. I began to feel dehydrated; fear

and negativity tend to do that to you. As your brain goes on overdrive to keep your senses working, its water content gets depleted. I knew that if this went on for long, I'd begin to hallucinate.

At this point, the stifling sensation became more acute.

I curled my fingers into fists. I found myself breathing hard. There was something in here with me.

'Are you here?' I said aloud, but my voice was barely a whisper.

As if in response, I felt something move behind me. I turned on my heel as quickly and silently as I could; and then I saw it – a darker mass standing out against the pervading darkness, moving from my left to the right.

It glided by slowly, as if floating in the air, reached a point and stopped.

I could sense it. I could almost feel it. There was a vibe emanating from it which had me in its grip.

'Are you the zamindar?' I asked.

The thing moved ahead, as if asserting the fact.

'You have to go,' I said, my voice breaking. 'This isn't your home any more. You cannot be here forever.'

In that moment, I was struck by the realization that the entity was in the throes of guilt. It neither spoke nor manifested itself in any other manner, but I felt the weight of that guilt. The negative vibe it carried was so strong that it seemed to penetrate my flesh and touch my very bones.

'Would you like to go? Would you like me to set you free?' I asked.

For one tension-filled moment, I thought I had gone too far. I felt that the presence might break through its reserve and come at me and I'd meet with the same fate as the others who had dared to trespass here – or maybe, worse.

But the seconds passed and nothing happened. The darkness was still there, immobile, impenetrable.

Slowly, I began to back away towards the door.

'I get it,' I said. 'Your lack of reaction to my words indicates that you want the same thing too. Yes, that's the correct decision.'

I tapped on the door – seven knocks, as our team had decided earlier. The door was immediately opened. Savio and Shiva rushed in with their flashlights.

'What happened?' Savio asked. 'Did you see anything?'

I looked at the spot where the dark presence had been a while ago. There was nothing there now.

'We need to do a cleansing,' I said. 'Bring the sage out and let's get down to business.'

Over the next hour, I described to Savio and Shiva what I had experienced. Then we set about cleansing the place. The manner in

which we did it was to anoint every door and window of the house with the fumes of an herb known as California sage *(Salvia apiana)*. The sweet smell of this herb is known to accelerate the journey of malevolent spirits into their otherworldly domain.

As we went along, infusing the entire house with the fumes, I sensed the change coming over the premises. When the choking sensation that had hung over the place was gradually replaced by a cool nocturnal breeze, I knew that the deed was done.

'It's been a long night's work, brothers,' I remarked to Savio and Shiva, when we had finished anointing the last window of the house. 'The house is cleansed now. I can sense the evil has left and I hope it stays that way forever. And now, there's just one thing left to do.'

'What is it?' Shiva asked.

'The Dancing Lady,' I said. 'She won't leave easily. She has faced a lot of torment here.'

'Then what do we do? How do we release her?'

'There's one way. She is held back here because of her bones. They are somewhere deep in the well and we cannot get to them.'

'Then how do we liberate her?' Savio asked.

'Salt,' I said. 'Salt, the white compound obtained from nature, is the symbol of purity. It is a highly positive substance and it can ward off entities that do not belong to this realm. We must get some salt.'

Shiva volunteered to go into the village and get some salt from the caretaker's house. It was about 2 a.m. by then, but we were sure that with us poking around in the courthouse, Mohsin would not be sleeping peacefully.

Shiva returned with the salt and two buckets of water. The long time he was away indicated how much explaining he had probably had to do.

We set down to work. We poured the salt into the water and prepared a saline solution. When the solution was almost saturated with salt, I hoisted the first bucket over the well, chanted the verse for spirit cleansing and splashed the brine into the well. It was like pouring a thimble of water into the ground; everything was immediately sucked in. I repeated the process with the second bucket.

Then we sat on the steps of the courthouse, waiting and watching, hoping that everything we had done had found its mark.

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We walked out of the courthouse only in the morning when the caretaker arrived to look in on us and enquire about our well-being. He found us sleeping on the inflatable mattresses we had brought along and laid out on the floor inside the courthouse.

'You slept in here?' he asked incredulously.

'Yes,' I answered. 'It was necessary. We slept like babies in this house after we had completed all the cleansing rituals. As you can see, nothing untoward happened. We are all in one piece. The house, as you can see, is perfectly safe.'

Mohsin had no words to thank us. We packed our bags and left the courthouse, carrying memories that would remain with us for an entire lifetime.

# 7

# THE REVENANT

## *Indore, 2017*

IT WAS AN AWKWARD moment at the Tripathis'. We, a PAIRS team of three, were squirming in our seats, clueless as to how we should react. I could feel the eyes of Savio and Mason on me, but for once, I too was at a loss for words.

We had travelled some 200 km to visit the home of fifty-two-year-old Sushma Tripathi, who had been widowed barely a month ago. Her three daughters and old mother-in-law sat in the drawing room with us, each of them busy sizing me up.

The source of our discomfiture was something Mrs Tripathi had just said.

'Mr Mohanty,' she had begun, somewhat heatedly, 'It is true that I have called you over to our house for this investigation, but I would like to make it clear that none of us have good feelings about your show. It was while watching it that we received the terrible news of my husband's accident. Your show will always remind us of the biggest tragedy in our family. It is *manhoos* for us.'

That word, a raw term in Hindi, hit me hard. It means 'inauspicious'.

I felt I had to say something.

'I am truly sorry about your loss, madam,' I told her, 'but it is simply a coincidence that you were watching *Mana Ki Na Mana* at that time. Despite the show's wide viewership, we have never faced such an accusation before. For my part, I'm keen on helping you. There must be some reason why you called us here.'

The woman bristled at my tone. Her anger was palpable. I could understand where it came from. There are people whose defence mechanism in the wake of a tragedy impels them to lash out, to find someone or something to blame, however irrational that might be.

The older daughter spoke up now. 'I am Nandita,' she said, 'and these are my sisters, Jaya and Aruna. Please excuse my mother. She has not been herself lately. We really want your team to conduct an investigation here. And we know only you can do it.'

'What kind of investigation?'

'The kind you do. Ghosts and spirits.'

She made us sound like ghostbusters. But that was all right. Most people did. 'You will have to give me the details, Nandita,' I said.

Nandita looked at her mother, who gave a slight nod of assent. Then she began, 'The thing is, Sarbajeet bhai, our father's ghost is still in the house.'

I slapped my knee, a subconscious reaction to the suddenness of her pronouncement.

'Pita ji died in a road accident on this same date last month,' Nandita went on, a tear beginning to glisten in her eye. 'He was returning from a meeting in Bhopal when a truck rammed into his car. We received his body in pieces.'

The moment these words were uttered, a loud wail issued from the old lady, the deceased's mother, sitting in the corner. The youngest daughter, Aruna, went and sat beside her, consoling her as best she could.

Nandita steeled herself and went on, 'We performed all the last rites religiously. But two weeks after our father's death, strange things started to happen.'

'What kind of things?'

'One night, I had a dream. It was about pita ji. It appeared as if he were floating, but his legs were trapped somewhere. He was struggling to escape. He looked at me and tried to say something. Then the dream ended. What was strange about it was that we three sisters all had the same dream that night.'

I looked at the sisters for their response; they wore matching expressions confirming the truth of the statement and betraying their bewilderment at this bizarre coincidence.

Shared dreams are still a very nascent concept. Though there have been well-documented cases of multiple people simultaneously having the same dream, there has been no conclusive evidence or explanation as to why that happens. This was the first case that I had heard of it in my career.

'But it is not just the dream,' continued Nandita. 'Shortly afterwards, we began to see pita ji in the house.'

'See?' I asked. 'You actually saw him?'

The sisters nodded. Aruna, who was probably just eight or nine, cuddled closer to her grandmother, unable to conceal the shiver that ran through her body.

'He walks about the house at night,' Nandita went on. 'We have seen him sitting in that chair' – she pointed to an old reclining chair – 'and rocking it, the way he used to, when he was alive. Mummy caught a whiff of his tobacco in her room just a few nights ago. Jaya has seen him in the garden, walking barefoot on the grass at five a.m. He used to walk regularly on the grass like that, claiming it was good for his blood

circulation.

'Two nights ago, I saw him too. I woke up at an odd hour – I think it was about ten past four in the morning – and he was there, standing by the door of my room, as if wondering whether to come in or not. I could see his shadow clearly against the corridor light. I thought I was dreaming again, so I shook myself awake and pinched myself hard. I didn't see him again, but it was too real to be a dream.'

We listened to her account in stunned silence. Even after Nandita had lapsed into silence, it seemed as if her grim narration was still in progress, so profound was the impact of her words on everyone there. The expressions on the faces of the entire family left no room for doubt that whatever she had described had been experienced by all of them.

'What can you tell us about all of this?' Nandita asked.

'Everything you said – if it is exactly as you narrated it – is concrete evidence of paranormal activity in the house. There are grounds for it too, as your father died in such an unfortunate manner. Going by our past experiences, I feel that he is trying to convey something to you.' I leaned forward. 'Tell me about his work, his friends. Did he leave anything pending? Did he have any enemies or close friends?'

Nandita looked at her mother. It was clear that she was eager to share something, but was seeking her approval before she went ahead. Mrs Tripathi nodded.

Then Nandita turned to us and said, 'Our family is building a hospital. It was pita ji's dream.'

'Oh, that's great news,' I said, sensing a potential cause for the activity. 'Can you tell me more about it?'

'We have been at it for the last ten years,' Nandita said. 'Pita ji acquired the land and had to pursue the authorities for all the permissions required. He managed to get together all the documents. In fact, we were going to do the bhoomi pujan shortly. Then this happened.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said. 'So what's the status of the hospital now?'

'The work is stalled,' said Nandita, stifling the sob that rose in her throat. 'Sudhanshu, pita ji's assistant and good friend, is trying to put things in place. He's a kind man. But the problem is that we don't know where pita ji kept the land-use permission documents. Without them, the building cannot be constructed.'

'Is there anything else?'

'I think I have said all there is to say,' said Nandita. 'Now you have to tell us what to do.'

Suddenly, the old lady who had, so far, been weeping in the corner of the drawing room, spoke up in a loud voice.

'All this is useless talk!' she exclaimed. 'I know that my son's soul is unhappy. What will these young people you've called in do? You have to get an experienced tantric or *ojha*. They will set everything right.'

At the mention of a traditional exorcist, none of us knew what to say for a moment. Then the woman relapsed into another bout of sobbing and looked away.

'Sorry about that,' Nandita said. 'You know how it is…but please…'

I stood up. 'I know,' I said. 'In our line of work, we face such rejection and scepticism every day. It is part of the job. However, do allow me to focus on the task you have called me here for. Give me a moment to understand the layout of the house.'

It was a large house with spacious interiors, the kind extended families used to live in once, with each unit having its own room and a common kitchen. Standing there, I could see six rooms, three on either side, their doors opening out into the drawing room.

One room drew my attention right away – the one in the north-eastern corner of the house. Unlike the other rooms, this one didn't have a proper door, but a sliding screen. At that moment, the screen was partially open.

'That was pita ji's reading room,' Nandita informed me.

I nodded.

Savio and Mason had started prepping the equipment, with the women eyeing our every move.

'Are you the only occupants of the house now?' I asked.

Nandita nodded.

'All right,' I said. 'We are going to begin our investigation right away. For the time being, I'd like all of you to move out of these rooms.'

'And just where are we supposed to go?' the old lady snapped, her tone belligerent.

'Ma'am,' I said patiently, 'the outcome of what we are about to do is uncertain and unpredictable. We are dealing with spirits here. We'd like to ensure that no one here is harmed.'

'Why would my own son harm me?' the old woman argued, her voice tearful.

It took the daughters some effort and time to cajole their mother and grandmother into leaving the room.

'We'll be on the terrace,' Nandita informed me, as they walked up the stairs. 'Call if you need anything.'

I nodded. It was time to get down to work.

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There was a small portrait of the deceased, Devnath Tripathi, in the drawing room. It was adorned with a sandalwood garland and red *tilak*, the symbols marking the recent demise of a loved one. It was evidently a photograph from the gentleman's younger days, when he was probably in his mid-thirties. His eyes revealed the spark of a promising life and

his lips were curved in a smile. I stood in front of the photograph for a moment, trying to
get a mental picture of the man I was trying to investigate in
his afterlife, and stared into his black irises. I could discern nothing, though.

But when I walked across the hall, I sensed quite a different story. Without us even being aware of it, our homes and the furniture in them absorbs our energies, both positive and negative. It is these energies that give our homes their individual characters. In the vast space of the Tripathis' hall, I could discern pockets of gloom, areas where I sensed deep feelings of emotional tenderness. These were probably the very spots where the family had stood and mourned the demise the most, and their latent energies were still permeating the area. Even in our absence, the energy lingers and wears off only over time. I was sure Devnath Tripathi had left his energy behind too. Our quest, in that case, would be to find out to what extent it still lingered.

I moved cautiously towards the room in the northeast corner of the hall, where Tripathi had apparently spent most of his time. The door screen was made of thin plywood; it could have been knocked over with a simple push. I didn't touch it. Instead, I stood at the doorway and tried to peek in through the little gap left by the partially open sliding panel. The room did give off a strange feeling. Although it was already afternoon and there was bright sunlight outdoors, the interiors were gloomy.

I shut my eyes and tried to focus my energies. For a moment, I could make out nothing that was unusual. And then, I heard it – a sharp whistle.

There was something unreal about it, as though it wasn't a whistle emitted by someone in the room at that moment but drawn from the recesses of memory. We all get the feeling, sometimes, that if we shut our eyes and try to conjure up a sound we are familiar with, we actually hear that sound in our mind. This particular whistle wasn't the kind of whistle I'd ever heard before. It was a sharp, two-tone whistle, the first sound of shorter duration than the second. I tried to mimic it, but failed.

I sent Mason off to call Nandita downstairs. When she arrived and I asked her about the whistle, her eyes widened in surprise.

'So you now know for sure!' she said. 'That was exactly the way pita ji used to call us when he needed something.'

I immediately slid open the door screen. There was nothing in the room worth my attention, but the distinctive sound of that whistle would not leave my mind.

By then, I had discerned that there was something in the house that did not belong to our world. With the entire family providing testimonials of various sightings, sounds and odours they had experienced, I hadn't entertained too many doubts about it, anyway. But now I almost felt as if I had evidence confirming my gut feeling.

Outside, darkness was descending. Our team had been waiting and watching for almost an hour. Savio had set up the cameras in strategic locations, including a motion sensor right outside the room in the northeast. I had a GoPro fitted to my body. Mason was stationed in the room with an EDI device.*

I decided to begin with some direct and specific questions. This was possible because the investigation centred around a recent death and we had been provided with a great deal of information about the deceased.

'Mr Tripathi, are you in this house?' was my opening question.

There was utter silence. Savio had already shut down the electric power to the house to reduce all unnatural forms of disturbance in the surroundings.

I repeated my question: 'Mr Tripathi, are you trying to get in touch with your family? We can help you if you are.'

There was no activity for a couple of seconds. Then Mason rushed out of the deceased's room excitedly.

'I just got a flicker on the EDI!' he declared.

I was nonplussed. I ought to have received the response to my query, instead of Mason.

'Let's try it again,' I told him. 'Go back into the room.'

Mason complied and I repeated the question. We waited three seconds and he came out again.

'Yes, the second light flickered this time,' he announced.

Now, from a paranormal-investigation point of view, this was interesting indeed. What we were witnessing here was a definite phenomenon: the spirit was receiving questions from me, but responding on the device of another investigator, who was twenty feet away and in another room, separated by a wall. Since this was quite a rare phenomenon, I seized the opportunity to conduct an experiment that had been on my mind for a long time.

The experiment involves what is known as a spiritual bridge, where the same entity can communicate simultaneously with two different humans. In a way, they are showing multiple manifestations of themselves. The fact to be noted here is that the entity which can achieve this is extremely active and sensitive.

With Mr Tripathi, I saw the scope of conducting a definitive experiment into this phenomenon. I asked Mason to go back into the room. Then I spoke in a loud, clear voice.

'Mr Tripathi,' I said, 'I see you are trying to communicate with us.

With your permission, I'd like to ask you to participate in a small activity with us. This is to see how potent you are in your other life. What I'm asking of you is quite simple. My friend is in your room now. Could you show a sign on his device and then, within thirty seconds, show a sign here on my device as well? Please help us out here, as we are only trying to help your family.'

Mason took up his position. Since he was inside the room, I could not see him, but I sensed that he was on high alert. Savio was recording the entire phenomenon.

'Mr Tripathi,' I said, 'please show the sign on my friend's device now and then on mine in thirty seconds.'

All that could be heard in the silence was the sound of our heavy breathing.

Suddenly, Mason shouted, 'Here it is! All five lights!'

Even if he hadn't uttered a word, I would have guessed from the glow emanating from the room where it had happened.

I maintained my silence and started counting down in my mind: '30, 29, 28… 22, 21, 20… 18, 17, 16…' My eyes were fixed on my EMF meter, as if it were the only object existing in the world at that time. 'Five, four, three,' I continued and finally, ended with 'Two, one…' There it was! On the dot of the thirtieth second, three lights on my EMF meter lit up. For a moment, Savio forgot the situation we were in and gave me a high five.

'That's super, Mr Tripathi!' I said encouragingly. 'I need no further proof of your presence. Now I just need you to listen to me.'

I waited for a few seconds. I was issuing a command here, taking charge of the situation, as it were, and I was keen to ensure that Mr Tripathi wouldn't take it amiss. He didn't seem to.

'I have heard of your tragic death and I offer my sincerest condolences on behalf of our team,' I said with the utmost respect. 'I don't know why you are still present in this dimension, but I would like you to know that your family, especially your daughters, can see you in this form and they are terrified. Do you want them to be afraid of you?'

His response was clear from the silence that ensued.

'I thought so,' I said. 'No father would ever like to terrify his daughters to this extent. But please tell us why you are here. I am your agent today. Please help me help your family.'

I waited for my words to be absorbed.

'Do you wish me to call your family now?' I asked and waited with bated breath for the response.

This was decidedly the purpose of Mr Tripathi's spirit, but I needed to seek permission from him. I knew he would respond to it.

Sure enough, there was a flicker on the device.

I sent Mason off again to summon the family, except the youngest daughter. The experience would have been too great an emotional strain.

Within a minute, the mother and her two older daughters had come downstairs. The deceased's mother chose to stay back on the terrace, explaining that she would prefer to do without this kind of aggravation at her age.

I asked Mr Tripathi's widow and his daughters, Nandita and Jaya, to sit on the couch without disturbing anything. The room was plunged into darkness. We had closed all the windows too and it was hot and suffocating inside, but we had to bear it so as not to spoil the entire act by allowing external disturbances to flow in and disrupt the proceedings.

I could feel the three women's eyes on me.

Keeping my eye on the room in the north-eastern corner, I told the women, 'Ladies, we have some evidence that Mr Tripathi is with us. I have been talking to him.'

I heard a gasp from Mrs Tripathi.

'I have asked him to manifest himself to you and he has consented,' I went on.

I could sense the charged emotions at that moment. There were tears in their eyes, but underlying the film of tears was a certain dread as well.

'He is here,' I announced and they almost jumped in fear. 'Which one of you would like to ask him questions?'

'How will he reply?' asked Nandita. 'Will we be able to see him?'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'The rare visions you have had earlier could be because of your own mental state and how he managed to concentrate his ethereal energies at that time. But since we don't know a lot about how spirits manifest themselves, I cannot say for sure.'

'How do we talk to him?'

'You ask him questions,' I said. 'We will receive his replies on this device.' I pointed to the EDI device.

The women eyed the device as if it were some holy man who possessed all the knowledge and wisdom of the world.

Mrs Tripathi slowly began with, 'Are you Nandita's father? Are you here?'

There was a mild flicker on the device. The women did not understand it at first. They looked at me and I nodded. It was enough to let them know that this signalled an affirmative response. Mrs Tripathi could not hold back her tears any longer and let them flow.

'Pita ji, how is it in the other world for you? Are you happy there?' Nandita asked.

There was no response to that.

'These kinds of questions won't work, Nandita,' I explained. 'You have to ask specific questions. Also, we cannot ask too many, because each one of them requires the spirit to accumulate energy, which is a huge task even for the strongest of spirits.'

'He is Nandita's pita ji, not a random spirit!' Mrs Tripathi bawled.

'Please control your feelings, ma'am!' I urged. 'I say this in your best interest.'

I motioned Nandita to carry on.

What followed was a highly emotional exchange, one of the most difficult that our PAIRS team has been a part of. The circumstances under which this investigation was being carried out made it infinitely more difficult for us. It also taught us a valuable lesson. Paranormal investigations do not merely involve the handling of ghosts and spirits; they are also about dealing with humans and their extremely complicated feelings. The investigator's skills are somewhat similar to a medical doctor's in the sense that his expertise is not merely confined to his patient's ailment, but also extends to handling the patient's relatives.

The next few minutes would be a dream come true for any paranormal investigator. We saw, in live action, a two-way communication between a spirit and the humans he had been bonded with in his life. This conversation is, without doubt, the hallmark of our career.

The questions Nandita asked her deceased father were followed by replies in the form of flickering signals on my EMF device.

'Pita ji, are you trying to tell us something?'

Three lights flickered.

'Pita ji, your death…was it a murder?'

There was no response.

'Was it an accident?'

The lights flickered. It was accompanied by another loud cry from the mother.

'Do you want to tell us about the hospital?'

The lights danced again.

'We are trying to continue with your plans for it, pita ji. But we are not able to find the documents. Do you know where they are?'

There was silence. I reminded Nandita to be specific.

She continued: 'Are the papers in your room?'

There was no response.

'Are they in the study?'

No response.

'Are they in Dadi Ma's room?'

Again, no response.

After many similar questions, she asked, 'Are they in the puja room?'

Immediately, three lights flickered.

The women's mouths fell open in surprise. Mrs Tripathi shot up from her seat and rushed to the small room where the family conducted its prayers. We could hear the clatter of things being moved around. And then she came out with a green envelope. There was a smile on her face

and tears in her eyes.

'The documents were in the wardrobe where we keep your father's puja clothes, tucked in between the folds,' she announced. 'How on earth did they go there?'

Mrs Tripathi sat down and then, for the first time since we had met, gave me a smile.

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Several more queries were put to the spirit after that, including a question on whether they should trust Sudhanshu to carry out the hospital work. The answer was in the negative and the family resolved to finish that work themselves. Try as they might, they could not elicit a response as to why they should not trust Sudhanshu and I advised them to abandon that line of questioning.

'Maybe, even as a spirit, your father does not want to incriminate his best friend for whatever reason,' I told them later.

As the questions followed, I noticed that the lights on my device were becoming dimmer, an indication that the spirit was tiring out.

The most difficult part lay ahead. Finding the right words, I said, 'Ma'am, Nandita, Jaya, I am sorry, but Mr Tripathi is becoming weaker. His purpose of staying back here has been fulfilled. You have found the papers. We must now let him go.'

No one uttered a word, but I could see the tears welling up again in their eyes. The tears had been flowing down Mrs Tripathi's face throughout; now Nandita held her firmly by the arm and turned to me.

'Do what is to be done,' she said.

I could not wait any longer. I had to set Mr Tripathi free now. His bond of love with his family was holding him back. I had to give him a pathway by which he could exit. I tried a route that I had used on a couple of occasions before.

I said in a clear voice, 'Mr Tripathi, the time has come for you to depart. I shall be opening a pathway for you. On your right, you will see a white gate. When that gate appears, you have to walk through it. I shall count down from three. You have to do this or you will be trapped here forever.'

Sitting in the dark, the women held each other's hands. No one could see anything; yet, the visual aspect of the experience seemed to take precedence.

'The gate has now appeared,' I said, pointing at a spot in the distance.

For the others in the room, nothing was visible.

'I will give you a moment to say your goodbyes,' I continued, 'and then count down from three. Please do as I say.'

I took a deep breath. Then I counted, 'Three…two…one…'

The moment I finished, the last light on the EMF meter was extinguished. The spirit could not have given us a more concrete sign that it had left.

Thus ended one of our most emotionally charged investigations. Usually, when we drive back to our office after concluding a case, we discuss its details. But on that particular night, the PAIRS team was silent. The emotional state of the Tripathi women had left a deep impression on our minds.

Had we done the right thing? We had brought the bereaved family close to the spirit of the deceased person and had, in the process, opened healing wounds. That's why paranormal investigations are tough; you don't know which wound you might be reopening and what you might unearth beneath the surface. But I have learnt one thing after dealing with death and sadness at such close quarters: a single evening that revives buried grief may be painful, but ultimately closure is infinitely preferable to living with unresolved pain forever festering beneath the surface.

That night, when I meditated, I wished the family well and sent positive energy their way.

When we eventually received a card inviting us to the bhoomi pujan ceremony of the Tripathis' hospital a month later, I knew we had done the right thing. It was a simple card, but the message was warm and clearly sent with a lot of love. I could feel the positive vibes even as I held it in my hand.

# 8

# AN ABORTED INVESTIGATION

*Mumbai, 2019*

IT WAS A LANGUID June afternoon, and we were cooped up in a famous sound-recording studio located in Mumbai's hub for film industry professionals – Andheri. Outside, the sky was overcast, in keeping with the weather forecast of heavy showers over the next few days. If it hadn't been for Laxmi's vigorous insistence, we would not have made that trip at all.

Laxmi was the owner of the studio. Well-groomed and well-educated, with an air of sophistication, she stood apart from the usual people who call us for paranormal investigations. Her studio was quite spacious by Mumbai's standards. It housed three floors – the ground, the first and the top. The ground and top floors were undergoing some kind of renovation. We were told that owing to the increased demand for more dubbing rooms, some were being added on the top floor. This left only the first floor operational and available to us. Laxmi made us sit in the glass-walled cabin that was her office and shared her sordid tale with us.

Our PAIRS team that day included Pooja, Savio and me. Our purpose was to have a preliminary look at the area and return for an investigation, if there really seemed to be something worth exploring.

Soon after the coffee Laxmi had ordered for us arrived, she explained why she had called us. 'It's nice of you to come,' she began, then got to the point. 'As you can see, this is a recording studio. These days, owing to the rush, we have been keeping our studios open at night too. Of late, weird things have been happening here, which have really spooked us out. Especially, at night.'

'What kinds of things?' I asked.

'I mentioned them to you over the phone,' she reminded me.

'You had, Laxmi ma'am,' I agreed, 'but could I request you to repeat it for the benefit of my team? We will all be looking for clues and signs here and we all need to be aware of the details.'

'Okay, then here goes…' Laxmi reclined on her swivel chair and half-closed her mascara-accented eyes as she plunged into her narration. 'Three nights ago, a guy in Studio 3 was working alone on dubbing. He

had a headset on and his systems in front of him. He was completely engrossed in his work when, out of the blue, there was a disturbance. He rewound a bit and checked. The video played normally. Ten seconds further into the playback, the same disturbance recurred. It sounded like a woman's high-pitched scream. Thoroughly spooked by now, he shut the systems down. Next morning, when he checked again, there was no disturbance at all in any of the videos.'

'What are the other experiences people have had here?' I asked.

'The next one involves Kaushal, our assistant. He usually finishes his work at 9 p.m., has his dinner here and then leaves for home. One night, when he was just about to sit down for dinner, someone pulled his chair back without warning. Taken unawares, he toppled over and hurt himself quite badly. He swears he heard a woman laughing in the room.'

'You told me about some other incidents too,' I prompted.

Laxmi nodded. 'In fact, we have all felt some activity or the other here that cannot be explained logically. Once, that tumbler by the water cooler fell down on its own for no apparent reason. I was sitting right here when it happened. I myself have felt someone tap me on the shoulder; when I turned to look, there was no one there. None of us stay here at night now. Only the people to whom we rent out the studios carry on with their work. In fact, we don't even use the bathroom after sunset since it is right next to
Studio 3 where most of these strange things happen.'

Pooja leaned forward. 'So, all these things happen in the night, do they?' she asked. 'Are you sure no one is up to any mischief?'

Laxmi shook her head. 'That's not possible. We have tight security here. Cams are on all night. And since these things started happening, we have become extra vigilant.'

'What do you want us to do?' I asked.

Laxmi waved her hands around vaguely. 'Do your thing,' she said. 'Our business is getting adversely affected because of all this. The news is spreading. You know the film industry… They're a superstitious lot. The producers are now shying away from using our studios. Just get to the bottom of this, please, will you?'

'It will cost you,' I said.

'Of course. Money is not a problem.'

Laxmi took us around the place. The first floor was the only accessible one; and that was where all the activity had been taking place. Laxmi indicated the infamous Studio 3. It was at the farthest end of the floor and the toilets were right across from it. The end of the corridor lay in near darkness.

Before taking our leave, we negotiated our fee with Laxmi and promised to return the following afternoon.

From the inputs we had in hand, this promised to be an interesting

investigation for the PAIRS team, for we had never worked in such a setting before. I wouldn't mind admitting that I was actually looking forward to it.

When we reported for the investigation the next day, Laxmi was waiting to introduce us to her husband, Girish, a joint owner of the studio. Girish was in his early forties and a good ten years older than his wife. Although tall, he was quite heavily built. In fact, with him occupying a seat in Laxmi's cabin, it seemed cramped and overcrowded. But what struck me most about him was his aura.

In spiritual parascience, we believe that every individual has an aura, a kind of invisible radiation around them, its quality determined by the person's internal energy. It is believed that if the person nurtures benevolent thoughts, the aura around him will be a positive one. If, however, the person's mind is infested with dark thoughts, his aura is likely to be negative.

Not all of us are capable of reading other people's auras. Only individuals with special abilities, like psychics, can do that. Among the team members with me that day were two psychics – Pooja and Savio. With time and experience, I have imbibed some of their skills too. At the studio on that particular day, the vibe I had received from Girish was a decidedly negative one.

While I was pondering over it, the man in question played for us some of the recording files on his laptop. The files played smoothly, without any glitches. I had started to ask him what his purpose was in showing us those files, when he produced his phone and showed us a picture. It was a screenshot of the very same file that was on the laptop, at the very timestamp where it had been paused. And right there, studying the two images, side by side, we realized how markedly different they were. On the picture on the phone, there was a heavy distortion of the sound graph. For about two seconds, there were many high peaks clustered together.

'That's a high-pitched sound,' Savio declared, pointing at the peaks.

But none of those peaks were visible in the audio graph on the laptop screen.

'The recording guy had the good sense to take a picture of the screen when the distortion occurred,' Girish explained. 'So here it is. Proof for you.'

It was almost irrefutable proof. Girish went on to show us images of other files. All of them had similar glitches. And all had timestamps clearly indicating that the incidents had occurred either late in the evening or at night.

'All right,' I said finally. 'I think we have enough material now to start our work. We will investigate this place to see if there is anything out of the ordinary. However, while we are carrying out our investigation, we would like to ensure that there isn't the slightest disturbance. Is there anywhere you can spend the night?'

'There is,' Girish assured me. 'The upper floor is practically empty. We could go there till you finish your work here.'

And so it began without any further delay – our first investigation in a high-tech recording studio.

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There was construction work in progress on the floors above and below ours. That was something of a hindrance and while we tried to work around it, it was certainly an uphill task. Moreover, apart from the general din they create in the course of their work, construction workers also use electrical and electronic devices which interfere with the natural frequencies of a place.

We sat down for a while and put our heads together, trying to find a way around this. It was then that Pooja asked, 'Did you get a serious negative vibe from that man too?'

I knew at once that she was referring to Girish.

'Oh, yes, I was going to tell you about that,' Savio immediately responded. 'So you sensed it too, right?'

'I did,' I affirmed, 'and I'm not even a psychic.'

'Well, what do you think?' Pooja asked.

'At this moment, it doesn't matter,' I said. 'Let's just do the work professionally and leave. They have already paid us. Also, there is a possibility, isn't there, that the vibe might not be from Girish at all, but from this place itself?'

'It wasn't there yesterday,' Pooja reminded me.

'Maybe, something has changed overnight?' I suggested. 'Such things are known to happen. Let's give the man the benefit of the doubt.'

'Fine,' said Pooja. 'Anyway, we are not here to judge. Let's continue.'

'But all this construction noise, man!' Savio exclaimed in exasperation. 'It's seriously tampering with *my* vibe.'

We had no solution for that except to wait until evening. There was still an hour to go for work to be called off for the day. So we waited.

It was around 6.30 p.m. that we were eventually able to get down to business. We saw the last of the workers leave. Girish, Laxmi, Kaushal and a few other employees of the recording studio were still in the building. They sent a message, informing us that they would be in their office room on the top floor (which hadn't yet been demolished prior to renovation). We could give them a shout if we needed anything.

Over the next few minutes, the place turned dark and silent. The lights on the ground floor and on the floor above ours went off, one by one. From a small window in the corridor, we glanced out at the street below. The place was located in the middle of a complex of buildings. A narrow lane passing between the two high walls of neighbouring office buildings provided access to it. As a result, driving a car right up to this building was not possible; the vehicle had to be parked on the main road outside. There was just one streetlight in the approach alley, that too about a hundred feet away, at the very mouth of the alley where it connected with the main street. The light that filtered into the alley was dim.

'It's a creepy place to have your office in,' I remarked. 'Do you still get the negative vibe, Pooja?'

My colleague remained silent. I observed that she was already in her zone, moving around the place, touching the walls and other areas with her palms. As is usually the case with her on such occasions, her eyes were closed. She had told me about it once – this kind of manoeuvring helped her to 'see' things with her inner eye.

Leaving her alone, I walked around the place with my electromagnetic frequency device. Savio had been entrusted with the job of shutting off all the electrical equipment in the place, including the main switch. There were a great many individual devices to shut down as well, including chargers, power banks, batteries, all of which could have residual fields. In fact, even headphones, microphones and loudspeakers carry residual fields when they have been in use for long. Needless to say, our phones were switched off at the very beginning of the investigation.

I moved from one studio to another, intentionally reserving Studio 3 and the desolate corner for the end. There was nothing incriminating in the first two studios. But the moment I entered Studio 3, the lights on my EMF device started behaving erratically. It was just a minor deviation, but for people like us, alert for any sign, it meant something.

At around the same time, Pooja joined us.

'What do you sense?' I asked her.

'There is…' she said and paused, her words trailing off. Her observation wasn't over yet.

I did not probe further. The best way forward, I have found out over time, is to just let Pooja do her job.

After about ten minutes, she said, 'There is something here.'

'What is it?'

'I can see it only vaguely,' she replied, her eyes still closed. 'It is a floating shape. Directly over our heads. The shape is of…' There was another long pause here. 'A woman.'

She opened her eyes.

Savio and I stayed silent, waiting for her to tell us more.

'I saw a woman,' she said. 'Young. She does not look too harmful, but she is angry about something.'

'Maybe, something unpleasant has happened to her?' I suggested.

'Maybe,' Pooja agreed, 'but there is no way of finding out what it was.'

'In any case, she does not belong here.' I looked at the corner on the ceiling Pooja had indicated. 'She has to leave.'

The moment I uttered the words, all three of us were gripped by a strange feeling. I have no words to describe it, but deep despair is as close as it gets to what we were experiencing. The only other occasion on which I had been overcome by such a feeling was when I had lost a dear relative in my childhood. It was a sense of bereavement, as if the spirit were harbouring some deep-rooted grief within her and trying to convey it to us. However, when spirits manifest themselves, they no longer have a sense of the extent of their actions. Thus, the feeling the being was communicating was so powerful that it verged on the extreme, threatening to literally suffocate us. I knew Pooja and Savio were also feeling the same way, because I saw them clutch their throats, the way I had.

We struggled for about a minute with that choking sensation.

'What's happening?' Savio asked, bewildered.

'She is surely here,' I said, still grappling with the feeling of asphyxiation. 'She is either trying to give us a message or she resents our presence here.'

By then, the choking sensation had eased.

'What do we do?' asked Pooja.

I stepped forward, motioning the others to stay behind me. I focused on the spot, the far corner of the ceiling which now lay in complete darkness, looking at it intently. I could see nothing, of course, but there was an intense negative feeling coming from the spot.

I spoke up in a clear, authoritative voice. 'Whoever you are, we have sensed your presence,' I announced. 'We are friends and we come in peace. But now, it is time for you to leave.'

We waited for a while, wondering what kind of response we would get to those words. Fearing the spirit would retaliate again and that there could be something more than a mere choking sensation, I signalled Pooja and Savio to steel themselves. But the minutes passed and nothing happened.

Pooja now stepped forward, pushing past me and walking on dauntlessly into the dark corner, feeling her way around the place as she went. After a few minutes, she turned back to us.

'Check your EMF meter, Sarbajeet,' she said.

I did. There was no fluctuation there any more.

'I think she has gone away for now,' Pooja told us.

We lost no time in seizing the opportunity to complete a kind of ritual that usually marks the conclusion of such investigations. Called a spirit seal, it is performed by placing a powerful spell on the entrances and exits of locations like this recording studio. Once a spirit seal is in place, it acts as a strong protection against entities attempting to set up their abode in the location.

It was past midnight by the time we had finished placing all the spirit seals. We made it a point to ensure that we had not left any place unsecured. We then went upstairs and spoke to Girish and Laxmi, who were still waiting for us. I advised them to keep the office unoccupied until morning; then it would be safe to enter. I assured them they would not have any complaints about the place henceforth.

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Weeks passed and the episode became one more for our records. We spoke about it at our month-end meeting and even explained to the rest of our PAIRS team how we conducted another successful spirit seal at the location. Our volunteers took in the information and we planned a future tour for new volunteers to demonstrate how the seal worked. That was the extent of our confidence in how well we had dealt with this particular investigation.

But six weeks later, our bubble burst. It was early in the morning, when I wasn't even fully awake, that I received a call from Laxmi. It took me a moment to recognize her voice.

'There is a problem,' she announced. 'In fact, there have been problems here for a while, but I decided to call you today. Last night, a guy working late in the studio was viciously attacked by a spirit. He felt as if he were being slapped and, indeed, when he checked, there were finger marks on his face. Pretty painful. They look like burn marks. I will send you a picture.'

The marks in the picture were prominent. An ordinary slap could not have left such finger impressions, however great the force behind it.

We called a meeting at the PAIRS office that afternoon to discuss the unprecedented situation. For the first time in our experience, a seal we had placed to keep out spirits had had its effect reversed. In fact, if my memory served me right, no seal placed by any experienced paranormal investigator had ever been known to be broken in this manner.

We put our heads together to figure out how this could have happened.

'What could possibly have gone wrong?' Savio wondered, baffled. 'The seal cannot be breached.'

I thought hard, trying to find an explanation. I even delved into some articles on the internet and reached out to certain other investigators

who were known for their expertise with spirit seals.

'The spirit seal cannot be breached,' I repeated firmly after I concluded my research. 'We have done everything that was possible in this case.'

The next morning, when Laxmi called again, I made this clear to her. But she was quite adamant about her point of view. Moreover, she had yet another story to tell: this time, there were scratches on one of their expensive computers. They looked like fingernail marks and ran quite deep; the nails that had inflicted the damage appeared to be very sharp, with pointed ends. Though I found this intriguing, I repeated what I had said to her earlier: we had put the seal in place and there was little more we could do.

There was another aspect to this entire incident. The intense feeling that had struck all three of us when we visited the studio hadn't left us yet. We could still feel the negative energy from the people there, especially Girish, and for days on end, we had been experiencing its debilitating effect. In fact, after we came back from the investigation, all three of us had slept till noon the following day. It wasn't normal slumber either; it was a dark, dreamless sleep. That had really unnerved us and we were relieved that the episode was over.

Only, it wasn't.

Over the next few days, Laxmi continued to badger us with repeated phone calls. During the first few exchanges we had, she requested us to go and check out the studio again, but as we refused to comply, her communication with us degenerated into abuse and even threats. At one point, she even went so far as to accuse us of failing to complete the job we had been paid for in full.

I had to put an end to this matter one way or the other. The woman had a point; the episode needed professional closure.

After giving it a great deal of thought, I called her and said, 'Laxmi ma'am, my team and I have discussed the issue amongst ourselves. I have done a lot of research into it too, trying to figure out how such a strong seal put up by us could have been breached. There is only one way that could have happened: someone must have tried to break it from inside. We had explored and examined the first floor alone on the day we undertook our investigation of your studio. Please send us pictures of the entire area, detailing every corner. Once we have those, we'll be in a better position to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion.'

The woman, however, was adamant that we visit the studio again. Nature, however, chose to work in our favour. There was heavy rainfall the following day that left the entire area submerged in water and brought all transport in the city to a standstill. Even if we had been willing to comply with Laxmi's demands, we could not have travelled in those conditions.

Given the circumstances, she agreed to send us the photographs we

had asked for.

It took just an hour for all the pictures to arrive in our email folder. Without wasting a moment, the three of us got down to studying them. One thing was clear: there was obviously something we had missed, and we needed to get to the bottom of it.

Working on our individual laptops, Pooja, Savio and I went over each of the pictures minutely. We enlarged them and studied every little detail.

As we were engaged in this task, Pooja seemed to be the most affected among the three of us. The entire investigation at the studio had been based on her observations. Over the last few days, she had been taking it hard. What had she missed? How? She had asked us those questions umpteen times, even going to the extent of suggesting that we visit the place again, regardless of the negative vibes we might attract.

As soon as the pictures arrived, she sat hunched over her laptop, away from us, poring over them, as if she were writing a thesis. Suddenly, hearing the printer in action, we turned to look at her.

'I think I am onto something,' she said.

'What?'

'Wait. I want to see the pictures on paper.'

She took the photos from the printer as soon as they were done. She laid them on the desk and went right back to her study. Then she started circling some areas on the photos with her marker.

'What is it?' Savio asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

The portions she had marked out were simple floor areas. We could see nothing there of any particular significance.

'Okay, I have seen something,' Pooja finally announced. 'These are pictures of the top floor, the one that is undergoing renovation right now. Here, here, here and here – all the places I have marked – there were a few things here.'

'What things?'

'They contained human cells. That's why I can see them.'

'What things, Pooja?' I repeated.

She had never been so evasive in explaining things to us before. Then she replied, 'Condoms.'

'What?'

'Look closely,' she urged. 'These are the secluded corners of the building. Things have happened here. Bad things. Men have taken advantage of women in these areas. The women have been exploited, for whatever reason, and they haven't spoken up. Maybe they feared humiliation or ridicule or had bartered themselves and received something in exchange, like a career boost, perhaps. This is the film industry we are talking about.'

'Who were these poor women? And who was responsible for their

exploitation?' Savio asked. His tone was angry.

Come to think of it, I had also lost my own composure by then.

'There are multiple people involved,' Pooja went on. 'It could be any of the people these studios were rented out to. Remember, they would work overnight? It could well be that guy Girish himself. Who knows? The only thing I can say conclusively is that evil things have happened here. In at least two of these places, I even see blood. Not too much of it, but it is there.'

'Who was the woman on the first floor then, the one we saw?' Savio asked.

Pooja was silent for a while and then said, 'I can only presume that she was one of the victims, and that she later died somehow. It does not seem like she died here, because I can sense no traces of it. But, perhaps, after her death by whatever cause, she has returned here to haunt the people who tormented her.'

Stunned, we sat there in silence for several minutes. What could we possibly say after hearing such unspeakable things?

When the initial shock of the revelation died down, Savio asked, 'What do we tell Laxmi? What will her reaction be when she knows her husband might be involved in this?'

'We'll have to tell her something,' Pooja said. 'But it will come as a shock to her, especially if her husband is involved.'

'Do you guys realize how this one revelation of Pooja's has made this case all the more dangerous?' I asked. 'It explains all the negative vibes. It explains how the seal was breached. That woman we saw on the first floor is perhaps not the only spirit either. There are more of them on the top floor, as this reveals.'

'The question is, what do we do now?' Savio asked.

'It's a no go,' I said firmly. 'We cannot share what we have discovered with Laxmi. The very hint of a scandal of this magnitude and her husband's possible involvement in it will put her on the defensive. There is no way she can turn the whole situation around. There's no way of predicting how these guys will react to our disclosures. The best thing to do under these circumstances is to drop the case right here and let karma take its course.'

'But how can we just drop this, Sarbajeet?' Pooja asked.

'See, right now we have no proof of anything apart from our conjectures. Though I feel we must take some legal recourse, what will we peg our claims on? But that does not mean we should drop it entirely. I have a way to ensure this doesn't happen again,' I said.

When the rains cleared the next day, we paid a visit to the dubbing studio. Laxmi was anxiously waiting for us. She was mildly surprised when we asked for a meeting with Girish before we told her of our decision.

Girish was on the top floor in the makeshift office, surrounded by the sounds of the renovation work in progress. Pooja, Savio and I entered the little cabin and closed the door to ensure no one could hear us.

'What is this about?' Girish asked, looking up.

Pooja laid out copies of the photographs she had brought along. Certain spots in the photographs were circled in red. Most of them were dark corners of the studio.

'What are these? Am I supposed to see anything?' he asked.

'You won't see them in these photos,' Pooja said, 'because the places have already been cleaned. But you probably did not count on the fact that I am a psychic. I can see things others cannot. And, in these pictures, I do see something. I see the vestiges of some despicable acts.'

'What are you saying?'

'Who were the girls who were taken advantage of here, Girish?' Pooja went on, even as his mouth fell agape. 'Were they aspiring actors? Or girls looking for work at the studio? I don't know who they are. I don't even know who the men were who did all those acts with the girls. But I know they happened. And there is no way this could have happened without inside involvement. Somehow, my suspicion is on you. I think you knew about the dastardly activities going on here.'

'Are you out of your senses?'

I took over. 'No. We are definitely not out of our senses. It is only that we don't have proof. These paranormal activities going on here in your studio; do you think they are happening without reason? The reason is here, in these pictures. But, yes, as you say, there is no proof to implicate anyone.'

'So, get the fuck out of here!' he shouted.

'With pleasure,' I said. 'But before that, I will just give you one warning. Your dubbing studio is now on our radar. You know now what kind of abilities we have. I assure you that the next time anything happens here that is out of line, I will be the first person to come to know about it, wherever in the world I am. And then we will follow it up, be very sure of that, and bring the criminal to book.'

The colour of his face changed. The realization of what I had said seemed to dawn upon him. 'Can you really see things like that?'

All I did was to smile at him. It was a smile that held in it a thousand unspoken words and it displayed my confidence in what I had said. With that subtle threat, I left the cabin.

Going downstairs, we met Laxmi and informed her of our decision to end the investigation, but with the assurance that none of those things would happen again. Not believing us, she went on the offensive and resorted to name-calling, alleging that we were aborting the case. But when I stood firm, she was reduced to pleading. For a brief moment, I wondered if we should reconsider our decision and tell Laxmi of our

findings, but Pooja reminded me of where that would lead us.

When we stepped outside, Savio looked a bit worried. When asked, he said, 'Sarbajeet, I am not sure what you meant by that threat. I mean, we are psychics, Pooja and I, but we don't have abilities to look at present events that are occurring elsewhere in the world.'

I knew Savio would ask me that. I told him, 'Yes, and I know that. But does Girish know that? You saw his face, how pale he had turned. The fear that someone might be watching is enough for a guy like him to be more cautious.'

On that note, we left the premises.

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This case was memorable for a number of reasons. Although it had started off as a novel kind of investigation, it would take us to an area where we didn't want to go. It would expose us to the ugly side of human nature and make us realize that human beings could be far more insidious than any entity from the spirit world.

In fact, the more Pooja studied the photos from her laptop, the more anguished she would become, for she could hear the helpless, tormented cries of the women and their subsequent curses. Experiencing those moments as a psychic were enough to plunge Pooja into a depressive state and impel us to not only burn the physical photographs but also delete them from our email folder as well. It took our colleague several weeks to come out of that state.

Today, we consider this case among the ones we were unable to resolve to our satisfaction. But we have no regrets about it. We still stand by the decision we made that day to withdraw from the case in the way we did.

# 9

# PHANTOMS FROM THE PAST

*Kalinga, 2016*

IT WAS USUALLY AFTER sunset that Bishu, a young fisherman, followed his daily routine of setting up his nets at a chosen spot by the bank of the river Daya in Odisha. He would leave them overnight and return in the morning to collect the catch that had gathered in the net. One evening, it took him longer than usual to finish his job and by the time he was done, it was quite late. What followed was an experience that would put the fear of God in him.

It was around half past eight in the evening and Bishu was about to leave for home, when he heard a faint sound from the jungle that skirted the riverbank. Within seconds, the sound had grown considerably louder. Straining to identify its source, Bishu reeled back in shock when he realized that it was the furious trumpeting of an elephant. For several minutes, he couldn't believe his ears. An elephant? There *were* no elephants in that part of the village.

His incredulity gave way to fear, when the sound of trumpeting grew louder and was accompanied by aggressive thumping.

Bishu quickly put two and two together. There was a rogue elephant in the jungle, and it was running amok. The colour drained from his face as he realized the infuriated beast was headed in his direction.

The very next moment, the boughs of a tree nearby snapped off and fell. The ground shook violently. From behind the tree emerged the enraged elephant. And what a beast it was! Pure white and about 15 feet tall, it was a majestic animal with huge ivory tusks. A rich carpet was laid on its back with a resplendent howdah, indicating that this was a royal elephant of the kind kings and rulers had sat on in days gone by. Metal ornaments adorned its trunk and tusks, and a heavy metal chain hung around its neck.

Bishu absorbed all this in a matter of seconds. Then he realized, to his horror, that the brute had caught sight of him and was charging right at him.

The young fisherman ran for dear life, not even aware of the direction in which he was headed. He could hear the beast thumping its way

behind him in hot pursuit and feel the rush of air from the elephant's mouth as it trumpeted angrily. Bishu knew he was in mortal danger. There was no way a man could outrun a rogue elephant.

Turning to see how close the beast was to catching up with him, Bishu stumbled over a pothole in his path and fell. That was the moment he knew everything was over. Burying his face in the ground, he shut his eyes, expecting the inevitable, reserving his final thoughts for his near and dear ones and praying fervently that death would come swiftly.

But he waited in vain. As he slowly regained his breath and gathered his wits about him, Bishu became aware of the silence around him. There was neither thumping nor trumpeting; all the sounds that had terrified him moments earlier had suddenly died away. For a fraction of a moment, he wondered if he was already dead and had become a ghost. Perhaps, he had lost his hearing for that very reason?

Bishu opened his eyes and realized he was very much alive. He turned around cautiously. There was no elephant!

The young man sprang to his feet and ran all the way back to his nets. There was no trace of the beast anywhere, no tracks on the ground to indicate a large animal had passed that way, no fresh elephant spoor. None of the boughs or branches from any of the surrounding trees had snapped off. None of the bushes nearby had been trampled upon. It was as if the elephant hadn't passed that way at all.

Was his mind playing tricks, Bishu wondered. How could such an encounter that had taken him to the brink of death be no more than an illusion? With such questions playing on his mind, he thanked his lucky stars and quickly made his way home.

But the next morning, he had reason to be truly fearful when his neighbour, a much older and wiser man, unveiled the mystery of the elephant that had chased him.

'It was an *airavata*,' the man told him, 'a war elephant. Consider yourself lucky. What you saw was the ghost of a war elephant that died on that spot two thousand years ago!'

Noticing Bishu's confusion, the man went on, 'My dear boy, that spot by the bank of the river Daya is the same place where the Kalinga War was fought. What you saw was nothing out of the ordinary. Ghosts of the soldiers and their mounts who had died in the war can still be seen there. And they have led many people to their deaths. You are, indeed, lucky to be alive.'

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It was only in late 2016, when Bishu's story had been published in a local daily, that the PAIRS team came to know about it. Reading the report, my curiosity was piqued. We discussed it at our team meeting. We were

immediately captivated by the historic significance of this site – a battlefield where a war of epic proportions had been fought centuries ago; an army with military equipment far advanced for that era; casualties in battle that ran into lakhs… What we did not know was that this would also become the site of one of our most harrowing paranormal investigations ever.

Given the place's historical importance, the team felt some prior research was imperative before moving into action.

I discovered a museum in Bhubaneswar that had extensive material on the Kalinga War. I also sought out history professors at the local university to glean as much information and collect as many details as I could about this event.

It was in 261 BCE that Ashoka, the powerful emperor of Magadha, was impelled by his legendary territorial ambitions to annex the neighbouring kingdom of Kalinga and absorb it as part of his own empire. The brave people of Kalinga, however, put up a valiant resistance to thwart the emperor's plans. Declaring war on the neighbouring kingdom, Ashoka led a mighty army to the banks of the river Daya where a battle was fought ferociously. It is said that one and a half lakh soldiers perished in combat, most of them either maimed or trampled on by Ashoka's huge cavalry. Given the vast number of casualties they had suffered in the war, the small but proud kingdom of Kalinga was forced to surrender and accept Ashoka as its overlord.

History, however, takes an unexpected turn here. Despite his military triumph, Ashoka was unable to come to terms with the violence and bloodshed he had unleashed on the valorous but peace-loving people of Kalinga. Gruesome images of the war continued to haunt him. He was plagued by nightmares where he saw himself advancing towards victory through fountains of blood, even as severed body parts and entrails lay scattered around him.

The trauma these memories caused him would eventually serve as a catalyst in the emperor's transformation as a human being and the discovery of his higher self, before he finally set out on the path to peace and accepted Buddhism as his faith.

I also came to know that the very spot where Bishu, the young fisherman, had seen the apparition of the war elephant was among the areas that had witnessed the battles between the people of Kalinga and Ashoka's army.

When I eventually got the opportunity to interact with Bishu, he was quite firm in his conviction that the war elephant he had seen was not a figment of his fantasy. Never in his life had he imagined seeing something that wasn't there, he insisted. He had no addictions to speak of; he had never tried intoxicants or hallucinogens in his life. What he had seen was real; yet, it didn't exist in this dimension.

During preliminary rounds of the place, the PAIRS team also spoke with a few locals who had their own experiences to share. Among them was a woman who had once gathered firewood from an area close by, but now avoided the riverbank following a hair-raising experience. She told us how she had been walking along the bank on that occasion when she heard voices and was overcome by the feeling that she was being followed. Several times, she turned to catch sight of her pursuers, but there was no one. Suspecting that it might be some miscreants tailing her with mischief on their minds, she had tightened her grip on the scythe she used to chop the firewood with.

When she reached the riverbank, however, she realized that the voices didn't belong to anyone shadowing her. What she could clearly make out then were shouts and cries and the sounds of metal clashing against metal. Remembering the tales she had heard of the place's history as a battleground, the woman had dropped her bundle of firewood and fled the spot, never to return.

The fact remains, of course, that when a place is so firmly entrenched in horrifying tales that are a part of local lore, many stories take birth on their own and are more inspired by myth than truth. In fact, one such tale, narrated by a local schoolteacher, turned out to be quite hilarious. He claimed to have witnessed, during an evening walk, a strange creature sitting at the very top of one of the trees. At first, the teacher assumed it was a large monkey, but as he drew closer, he realized it wasn't any species of ape. According to him, the animal had sharp, humanoid features, but its most striking attribute was its hair, which was long enough to wrap the entire tree thrice, lengthwise.

The tale of the hairy creature amused us greatly and it perhaps induced us to let our guard down. It turned out to be a grave mistake, considering what was lying in store for us along the banks of the river Daya.

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It was the first time we were investigating this kind of terrain. The river flowed on one side; on the other lay a jungle. The expanse of soil that separated these two features was moist and squelchy. Perhaps, due to the river having recently breached its banks. We wore boots as we always did when investigating forested areas, but here, our boots seemed to sink into the soil with every step, making movement quite cumbersome.

Apart from me, the crew included Savio, Shiva and Srijit. Srijit was a new volunteer who had offered to manage the audio devices. He hadn't been on a paranormal hunt before and this would be his first. To be honest, I hadn't been too keen on taking him along on this particular venture as we were dealing with unpredictable territory. But Mason was

indisposed and this guy looked confident enough. Also, he was of strong build and robust physique, which, I felt, might come in handy at any time. It is always useful to have a muscleman around.

We reached the riverbank at the precise spot where Bishu had had his fall. The pothole was not difficult to locate. It wasn't a pothole, really, but a gaping depression in the ground, with a rock jutting out of it. It was a miracle that the fisherman hadn't hurt himself badly when he'd tripped and fallen here. The spot was about 200 feet from the nets and the path connecting the two points wasn't a straight one. The man had really been given a wild chase. If I looked over my left shoulder, I could see the forest behind me. Random birdcalls and the cries of animals – typical forest sounds – carried down to us.

As darkness crept in, however, I could feel a tingling sensation all over. Even the trees with their dense foliage that stood out darkly against the canopy of grey sky looked sinister.

Our preliminary observations over, I asked the team members to prepare themselves for the actual investigation. Srijit and I positioned ourselves by the fishing nets and asked Savio and Shiva to move farther away before starting their cameras. Srijit was standing close to me, observing the process.

I reached into my backpack and took out the K2 meter. Invariably, it is the first device I use when scoping an unknown area. No sooner had I switched on the K2 meter than its lights started blinking!

My team and I stared at each other, bewildered. The presence of these erratic lights meant that we were at the epicentre of some kind of paranormal activity. The place was probably rife with it.

'We can hit the ground running,' I told my team members. 'I'll start asking the questions.'

They had drawn in closer now and though we were pros at this game, apart from Srijit, we were overwhelmed by the familiar feeling of fear-tinged anticipation that invariably builds up when we're about to launch into every investigation.

'What happens during the questioning?' Srijit asked.

'I ask questions and if any entities are present, they answer.'

I explained the process to him, telling him to keep his eye on the K2 meter.

'How?' Srijit asked. 'How do ghosts do that? And if these ghosts are two thousand years old, how would they know how to work such a new-fangled device?'

It is a question I am asked often. Ghosts shouldn't know how to operate our modern devices, right? Especially, since most of them are so ancient? But the answer is simple.

'Ghosts do not exactly operate these devices,' I explained to Srijit. 'You see, all this device does is detect variations in the electromagnetic field

around us. It is a widely accepted theory in paranormal science that ghosts are a form of energy. To explain it simply, we are all a combination of mass and energy. When we die, it is mostly our mass that dies, but a part of that mass is converted into energy. Mingled with our soul, which is also a form of energy, it gives rise to what we believe is a ghost. It is the presence of these energies that bring changes in our devices. All ghosts have to do is be present.'

'So the manifestations you talk about are actually ghosts reconverting some of their energy to mass?' Srijit asked.

I beamed at him. The guy was quick on the uptake.

'Yes, perhaps,' I replied. 'That would be the most logical thing to assume.'

More enthusiastic now that his comment had met with approval, Srijit took up his position. Everything was in place now and the questioning began.

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I closed my eyes, trained my focus on the matter at hand and asked my first question. I said clearly, using the Odia language, 'Hello, my name is Sarbajeet and I have come to talk to you. Is there anyone out here who can hear me, see me and wishes to interact with me?'

Here, I must elaborate about my choice of language to communicate with the spirits. Considering this was an ancient location, there was every chance that the present version of Odia wasn't prevalent then. In any case, after all my experience with paranormal communication, I have come to believe that language, in the form of actual words, does not really matter. Spirits are telepathically able to understand the sentiment behind the words. There have been times when I have received replies before I could even pose a question verbally. Though I have not gone deep into this theory yet, my explorations so far have brought up many instances of this happening.

Everyone was quiet. All attention was on the ghost meter.
The lights were still blinking, but that had been happening earlier as well. It was no indication that my question was having
any effect.

After several minutes, I made another attempt to engage.

'If you are here, please respond,' I said. 'I come with no intention to harm or disturb. I just wish to talk to you.'

There was a momentary shutting down of the lights, before the blinking resumed. The other guys moved in closer to observe the lights. I held out my hand to signal to everyone that they should remain utterly silent, for I had a sense now that something was about to happen. I cannot really explain it, but I had this feeling that some waves (for want

of a better word) were converging at a point somewhere nearby that I could not see and something phenomenal was going to happen.

'The lights! Look!' Srijit suddenly shouted, breaking my concentration.

I gestured to him to be quiet. 'Hush, man!' I said, then looked at the lights.

This *w*as something quite beyond the ordinary. The lights were now blinking in a distinct pattern; every now and then, they would pause for a second or two at three lights.

'Are you here?' I said. 'If you are, please respond with five lights.'

All of a sudden, Srijit jumped in, 'May I ask a question, Sarbajeet?' And before I could reply, he asked, 'We can see you are trying to contact us. Are you among those who were brutally killed at this spot? Tell us how you died!'

I looked at him, aghast. This was simply not done! I realized it was entirely my fault that I hadn't prepped the rookie adequately. One should never ask a ghost directly about the manner of their death; if at all such a question is posed in the rarest of circumstances, it has to be done with due respect, keeping the dignity of the entity in mind. The way Srijit had asked the question, hopping and jumping in excitement, I feared what would happen next.

Sure enough, something did happen. A rumbling rose from a path near the forest, just where the pothole was located.

'What's happening?' Srijit asked, his face blanching with fear.

'Just be calm,' I told him. 'You incited the spirits. Now be quiet and observe. Otherwise, head back to the van!'

I had to admonish the poor fellow, but that was for his own safety.

My outburst concealed a rising fear. The rumbling sound we could hear was increasing in volume. Thinking it was the mad elephant's ghost, I signalled to Savio to get his camera ready at once, while being prepared to run if the need arose. However, after about ten seconds, I could distinguish something about the sound that made my hair stand on end. This was no charging elephant! These were people, a lot of people!

'What is that?' Savio asked.

Keeping my voice down so that it was no more than a whisper, I said, 'These are people. Soldiers. Listen. These are sounds of battle.'

Sure enough, they were. Though the sounds of combat seemed muffled and far away, they were certainly real. There was shouting and screaming, battle cries, the grunts of people launching their vicious attacks on their adversaries, the whimpers of those paralyzed with fear. There were squelching sounds, as metal blades sank deep into human flesh, dying groans and gasps of agony from the injured as their lives ebbed away. Hundreds of sounds, all mingled with one another, produced a cacophony of the worst kind of human agony ever. We could

actually visualize the gruesome scene as it might have played out on this very spot more than two millennia ago.

'Are we really hearing what we think we are hearing?' Savio whispered to me.

'So all those legends are true!' Shiva exclaimed in awe.

Not wasting a moment, we rushed to the spot in the jungle from where it appeared the sounds were originating. But there was nothing. We looked around; the place seemed undisturbed, utterly silent.

'Something might happen soon,' I warned. 'Set up your motion sensor here. Set up the cameras too. All we heard just now were voices, but something could manifest itself here.'

I must take a moment here to describe the atmosphere at this time. Twilight had been devoured by the growing darkness as night descended. It was around 8.30 p.m., about the time Bishu had seen the white war elephant. Also, the river flowing past had a distinctive odour that had struck every one of us. Legend has it that when vanquished soldiers of the Kalinga War died along the banks of this very river, its water had turned red with their blood. Surprisingly, at that point, I felt I could smell a faint trace of rust in the air. Rust, due to its iron content, smells very much like blood.

Savio and Shiva's movements were cautious, even wary, as they set up the cameras. Two cameras were set up about 20 feet away, their lenses trained on the spot where Bishu had tripped and fallen. A motion sensor was set up about 10 feet from the spot. The three devices formed a triangle, with the pothole at its centre.

While I was completely engrossed in overseeing the setting up of these devices, there was a loud shout from the river. This was unlike the ghostly screams we had just heard. This was different, a human cry.

With rising alarm, I asked, 'Where's Srijit?'

'I don't know,' Savio replied. 'I don't think he came with us.'

The three of us ran all the way to the riverbank. I didn't even have time to pray that our missing team member would be safe.

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Srijit was facing the river, his back to us. But I could see that he was trembling. His looming stance evoked anticipation, as if he was about to be attacked by something that we could not see.

I moved forward and gingerly placed my hand on his shoulder. 'What is it?' I asked.

'There was something in the water!' he exclaimed, his voice quaking.

I gave the others a signal to help Srijit. Working with the paranormal, we are used to incidents like this. There have been occasions when people are paralyzed with fear and we have to resort to treatment which

is more or less like first aid.

Savio and Shiva approached us and held the petrified Srijit so that he would not keel over. I offered him some water, looking directly into his eyes till they stilled and met mine. The eye contact was necessary for him to realize that he was among humans. I patted him so that he'd register my physical presence. When he looked stable enough, I offered him a candy, which he promptly accepted.

'It's okay,' I said with a smile. 'Happens to the best of us. Care to tell us what happened here?'

Srijit tried to compose himself. He rose to his feet without our help and turned around to look at the scene that had terrified him. Though his movement was sudden and jerky, he managed to steady himself.

'There is something in the water,' he told us with a distinct tremor in his voice. 'I was about to follow you guys, when I heard someone calling out for help. I knew it was not normal… No one would call for help in such a place… But I could not resist responding to it. When I turned, I saw bubbles in the water. When I looked closely, it seemed as if there was something beneath the water's surface. Something that was about to emerge from the water and grab me and… I thought I ran, but realized I hadn't moved at all. I just could not. Then I felt something touch me. I screamed. Ow!… My back… It hurts.'

We had been listening to his story with such rapt attention that his cry of pain did not register at once. When he grimaced, I realized that the pain he felt was real. He was trying to reach a particular spot on his back, but could not. Apprehensive about what I might see, I carefully lifted the back of his T-shirt.

All three of us drew a long breath at the sight.

There were three parallel marks running in wavy lines just below the back of his neck. They looked like scratch marks but were finer and, even in the darkness, we could see them clearly. The blood that had oozed from them had already congealed.

'He could not have scratched himself here,' Savio observed. 'He could not possibly have reached this spot on his back.'

I nodded. He was right. 'These marks look as if they have been made with some sharp weapon,' I said, fascination overcoming my worry. 'They are not normal scratch marks from fingernails.'

The next few minutes were spent scrutinizing the marks and taking pictures of them. I gazed at the river, scanning it from one end to the other, but as far as I could see, it was calm now. I could not deny, however, that there was a strong negative energy pervading the atmosphere. I recalled the local gossip about people endangering their lives by just being in this place and wondered if we were doing the right thing by being here and raking up painful memories of a long-dead past.

After such a close brush with the forces present here, I decided to amp things up. Though we were quite apprehensive by now, this was no time to give way to our feelings. We needed to rein in our emotions and maintain a tight grip over our senses.

I took up my position at the nets with resolve, faced the river and spoke in clear Hindi.

'I know you are here,' I said firmly. 'You have injured my friend. I don't know why you are doing this. None of us mean you any harm.'

The ghost meter was pointed at the river. The same pattern was repeated, with the three lights staying on for a few seconds and then rapidly blinking. It was a response.

'Thanks for the response,' I went on. 'If you approach closer, I will know. The lights will blink more. If you don't want to answer, just go away and the lights will go out. Don't worry. We just want to know more about the place. Will you tell us? Now please tell me: was this place known as Kalinga in the past? If yes, please reply with five lights.'

I deliberately chose to name Kalinga, surmising that if these were, indeed, the spirits of soldiers who had died on the battlefield, they might not have heard the name being mentioned for centuries. Rekindling past memories would facilitate communication.

However, there was no change in the pattern of the blinking lights.

'I am now going to ask you something that might not be easy for you to answer. If you don't wish to, simply go away.'

I drew a deep breath as the others watched. Then I put forth my question.

'Did you fight in a big war here?'

The blinking of the lights on the meter stopped. There was such a stark silence all around us now that I could actually hear my crew breathe. All eyes kept moving from the meter to the river and back.

'Did that make them angry?' Srijit whispered in my ear.

I was silent. The meter remained dead. I was preparing myself to ask another question, when the lights suddenly came on. It was just random blinking; there was no pattern involving three lights. Encouraged by even this little response to my question, I asked my next one.

'Thank you for replying. I just have one more question for you.' I knew I was taking a big risk now. Perhaps, my excitement had got the better of my discretion, but I stood firm and asked, 'Were you killed on this battlefield?'

This time, I knew I had overstepped boundaries. I had flouted the basic rule of paranormal investigation that you should never directly ask entities about how they died. But you really cannot blame me for that transgression. Standing in that place with thousands of years of history

behind it, the venue of a monumental event that had shaped the course of our country, discretion was easy to cast aside.

My courage or foolhardiness – call it what you will – was rewarded with a physical manifestation.

Some kind of movement had started in the water. There were ripples, as though something was swimming beneath the surface, and for a moment, I thought it was just that. Shoving the K2 meter in my pocket, I signalled to the crew to edge away from the bank. The ripples in the water increased. Then there were the bubbles Srijit had spoken of. It was almost like a Hollywood movie, where monsters lurk beneath the water and try to devour people on the bank.

But that was not the only thing we noticed. There was another thudding sound in the jungle behind us. Then, there was a crash, a loud one, as if something had fallen from the trees.

Something huge was approaching. Was it the war elephant Bishu had seen?

Savio and Shiva ran towards the spot where they had set up the cameras, because that was where the sound had come from. Srijit and I kept standing near the riverbank, observing the bubbles, fearful that something might jump out of the water at any moment.

Suddenly, I heard Savio's frantic shout, 'Sarbajeet! Come quickly!'

Leaving everything else, I ran towards the cameras. When I reached the spot, I was shocked to find all three tripods lying on the ground. They had toppled over and were probably broken.

As we were examining them closely to assess the damage, there was another violent tremor that made the damaged devices vibrate. We all spun around at the same time to see what could possibly have caused it. And there it was – a magnificent white tusker emerging from behind a tall clump of trees.

'He's huge!' Savio exclaimed.

'You see it? You see it?' I asked.

'I do,' Savio said.

'I don't see anything! Where is it?' Srijit asked.

'That thing is unreal!' I explained. 'Savio and I can see that elephant, because we are experienced in this field; our sixth sense is more attuned to such phenomena than that of the average person. Srijit, Shiva, count yourselves lucky that you don't see it.'

And I meant every word. The beast was enormous, just the way it had been described. For now, it was standing in one spot, poised behind the trees, but it was stomping on the ground furiously. Whenever it did that, the ground shook. Shiva and Srijit could not see the elephant, but they could feel the tremors.

'It could charge at any moment!' I warned. 'But I need to go back to the riverbank and see what's happening there. Savio, can you hold the

fort here?'

Savio nodded.

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I was back at the riverbank.

The ripples were still there in the waves; they seemed to have come closer to the bank.

From behind, I could still feel the tremors caused by the elephant's stomping.

For the first time, we were caught between two entities, both unknown, both with a history of centuries that had only made them stronger and more menacing.

The ripples in the water were now very close to the riverbank, but whatever was causing them was still lingering under the surface, as if reluctant to emerge.

'Who are you?' I asked again. 'I repeat, we have not come to cause harm or despoil this place in any way. It is your final resting place, after all. We respect the valour you had displayed in the war. Please do not harm us.'

The movement in the water did not cease. A sickening odour permeated the air now. From experience, I could tell it was the stench of blood. I did not bother to turn around and see if anything was rotting nearby and giving off this foul odour. In that moment, I was acutely aware that the smell of blood wasn't real; it was an olfactory hallucination of some kind, triggered by the tragic history of the place.

'Will you harm us? Is that elephant yours?' I asked.

The entity did not respond to the questions, but the bubbles beneath the surface of the water became more turbulent.

Then Savio shouted, 'Sarbajeet! It has emerged from behind the trees. Now it's glaring at us… Should we move away?'

I knew he was referring to the elephant.

'No,' I yelled back. 'They won't harm us. They know we are friends.'

I said that more for sake of the entity under the water than for the team. The constant bubbling under the water told me it was listening.

This, however, was followed by a loud and angry trumpeting. Clearly, the war elephant was preparing to charge.

Trying not to dwell on the harried state of my team in the clearing, I spoke, once again, to the presence under the water, this time, crouching down to be closer to it and indicate that I was not afraid.

'Sir,' I said, 'whoever you are, I know that you fought here. I don't know who you are, but I am sure you fought bravely. I am sure you died for your country, whichever it was out of the two. You did what you were required to do. You died courageously, nobly. Let me tell you that our

nation has not forgotten this war or your sacrifice. Hundreds of books have been written about it. Movies have been based on it. The Kalinga War occupies an entire chapter in the history books prescribed for all schools. You are one of the brave hearts of our land.'

My words were somewhat drowned out by the trumpeting. Savio's shouts were incessant; he was asking me whether they should flee from the spot. The elephant had moved forward, sizing them up. And then it charged.

I heard the beast's thudding footfalls, the crash of broken branches, the frightened screams of my team members.

I stood there and uttered one last sentence to the entity under the water: 'Do you want to continue demeaning the noble sacrifice you made for your kingdom by terrorizing people today? Shame on you!'

All of a sudden, the sounds under the water ceased. There were no more bubbles. The water was calm.

I sat crouched by the water, my position unchanged, absorbing the calm, breathing hard.

Minutes later, I heard Savio shout from behind me, 'It's done, Sarbajeet. The elephant just vanished. It was mere inches away from us. Is it all over now?'

I realized there was, indeed, nothing further to be done. We had come here to find out what lay behind the mysterious phenomena we had heard about and we were going back home with an experience to share with future generations.

I stood up to leave, still shaken by all that had transpired. I found myself unsteady on my feet and reached out instinctively to Savio for support. He caught hold of my hand in time and saved me from falling, but even as he did so, I noticed he was gazing at the river. There was a look in his eyes, a look of awe and wonder.

'What is it?' I whispered, turning to follow his gaze.

There it was, a tall figure standing in the middle of the water, dressed in something that resembled the kind of armour worn by soldiers of that era. The one striking feature was its head, colossal, in comparison to the rest of its body.

'What is that?' Savio breathed.

I remained silent. For some reason, I raised my hand in its direction and saluted. Then Savio and I turned and left.

The primary lesson we learnt from this experience: some ghosts from the past wish to remain undisturbed. That's the only way they can soothe their tormented souls.

# 10

# THE VENGEFUL SPIRIT OF THE GOVERNMENT HOUSE

*Bhubaneswar, 2017*

It was while exploring locations rumoured to be haunted for *Mana Ki Na Mana*, the television show that had marked a major turning point in my paranormal career in 2016–17, that the PAIRS team and I had multiple opportunities to investigate paranormal phenomena at close quarters. What follows is an account of one such experience we had while on an investigation for the Odia television channel.

The format of the show allowed viewers to call and invite us to explore locations with unexplained activity. If the place seemed to have potential, we would make our way there, investigate it and record the activity for future episodes. We received all kinds of calls, of course. Some, inevitably hoaxes, others urging us to explore places where we found a perfectly rational explanation for the so-called activity. One particular 'haunted' house, for instance, had a loft where things allegedly went bump in the night. We discovered, however, that the movements and noises in the loft were the handiwork of a kitten left behind by its mother, who had given birth to a litter a few weeks ago.

There were, however, other places we investigated that challenged our assumptions and revealed facets of certain phenomena we had neither witnessed before nor would come across later. The government house in Bhubaneswar, where the PAIRS team came dangerously close to an unusually violent entity, is among the latter.

The caller was a woman who identified herself simply as Saraswati. Her voice was clear and firm, but I thought I detected an undercurrent of fear in it. During the conversation that followed, she shared her conviction that there was an entity from another dimension living in her home. She feared that her grandchildren were in mortal danger from it. Saraswati urged us to visit her home as soon as possible and ended the call by acknowledging that our television show was a godsend for her; it had given her a glimmer of hope that the problem hounding her family would be resolved before things went too far.

We marked a date on the calendar for our visit to her place on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar and set out on the appointed day in the van we used for our shooting requirements. The PAIRS team on that day comprised Savio, who was driving, Shiva, Srijit and me. Throughout the drive, Savio kept our spirits high by cracking jokes bordering on the obscene. The general mood was light and we expected this venture to be just another routine visit. Little did we know what kind of horrors were in store for us.

We reached the place at around four in the afternoon. The jokes had all petered out by then. As the house came into view, the grim reality of what we were about to undertake was brought home to us.

Saraswati's house was a two-storey cottage with a yard. A fence and a small iron gate marked the territory. Though the yard wasn't a gardener's delight by any stretch of the imagination, it did bear evidence that a human hand tended to it occasionally. The house itself drew my attention for quite the opposite reason. While I would not describe it as dilapidated, it did not look very safe for habitation either. By my estimate, it was at least fifty years old, if not more, and hadn't seen any major structural repairs yet, though it certainly appeared to be in need of them.

The most remarkable thing about the house, however, was the aura around it. The others in the team seemed unaffected by it, but the moment I set foot on the property, a clammy feeling grew within me. I experienced a fleeting sensation of something being lodged in my throat as I walked in. It wasn't a positive vibe and had it not been for the paranormal investigation we were conducting, I'd have left the place at once.

I rang the doorbell. A frail woman in her mid-sixties wearing a modest night gown opened the door. This, I discovered, was Saraswati.

She led us into a spacious hall with a wooden floor and wooden rafters holding up the ceiling, which seemed to be as ancient as the half-century-old structure. No one spoke for a while. The crew stood a little distance away as I walked around the hall, trying to make sense of the oddly negative vibe I was receiving. Saraswati invited me to take a seat.

'I am an ardent follower of your show,' she said in Odia. 'I didn't call you right away, because I wasn't sure if it would be of any use. But the activities in this house have increased significantly and I had no option but to enlist your help.'

I sat across from her and asked, 'Do you own this house?'

'It's a government house,' she said. 'There's a government hospital just across the street. I used to be a nurse there and retired three years ago. The authorities were kind enough to allow me and my grandchildren to continue living here.'

'So you have grandchildren?'

'Yes. Three of them. Two boys and a girl.'

There was something odd about the way she uttered those words.

I asked, 'What about their parents? Your children, I mean?'

She expelled a long, audible sigh. Her face contorted into a painful expression. I could see she was finding it difficult to express her thoughts. Finally, she said in a faltering voice, 'I had two sons. Both married. They used to live here with their wives and children.'

'Had?'

She sighed again. 'They are dead. All of them. My sons and their wives. My eldest son died of a heart attack. He was just forty and in robust health. The younger son and his wife died in a car accident that was never explained. Their car was found smashed and mangled in the middle of the road and there was nothing there to indicate what had caused the mishap – no other car or tree or even the trace of any animal that might have come in the way.'

Shocked though I was, I chose not to comment right away. I could see that Saraswati was gathering the courage to add something more.

Then she came out with it: 'I suspect the thing in this house got them all.'

There was deathly silence in the room following that utterance. My crew members were still as statues, hanging on to every word.

I asked, 'Are you sure there is an entity in this house?'

'As sure as the fact that you are sitting here in front of me,' she replied. 'Wait for some time and you'll see for yourself.'

'What happens?'

'The house is never silent,' she said in a monotone filled with foreboding. 'There's a constant hum here; you will hear it if you are absolutely silent. There are other things too. Doors and windows banging suddenly. Things that are moved from one place to another. Then there are footsteps. We don't go to the upper floor at all, because that's where everything happens, but I tell you…sometimes, it feels like there are people pacing up there. Sometimes, the sounds are loud, as if a house party were going on upstairs.'

'No one goes there? What about your grandchildren?'

She shook her head. 'They won't dare. Not after what happened to my eldest grandson.'

'What happened to him?'

She leaned back in her chair, her posture apparently relaxed, but her eyes still held that look of dread.

'Manish is a big fan of your show,' she began, 'and he's been watching it ever since the channel started airing it. In fact, it was he who introduced the rest of us to your show. One December afternoon, when the activities in this house were at their peak, his fifteen-year-old brain thought of doing something about it. So he took his iPad and went to

the terrace. None of us had been there for a long time. But he took that staircase – there in the corner of this hall – and went to the terrace on his own.'

She drew in a long breath. I waited.

'On reaching the terrace, he began tinkering with his iPad. For a few minutes, everything was normal. Then he heard a child giggling. Standing there in the middle of the terrace, Manish looked all around him. There wasn't a soul in sight, but gradually, the sound of giggling became more distinct. In fact, at one point, he even felt that someone was calling out to him, addressing him by his name. Terrified, he made a run for the staircase as fast as he could. But barely had he reached it when he felt overcome by a sudden chill. All at once, he was enveloped in darkness and then he swears he saw something materializing out of that darkness. Something resembling a human shape. He says it was quite ugly. He also says there was a pungent smell all around, a foul, choking kind of smell.'

Taking note of these details, I wondered if the entity allegedly infesting this house was a demon. The offensive smell, the ugly appearance – these were demonic traits. But the dead giveaway for me at that point was its manifestation as a child. Demons usually materialize as innocent children, at first, to deceive humans. It is only when the ruse doesn't work that they appear in their true avatars.

Saraswati continued with her account. 'Manish tried to dart past the black thing and run down the stairs as fast as he could. He reached the stairs, but then, without warning, he felt himself falling. He fell all the way down and hurt himself quite badly. Broke his iPad and all. To this day, he claims he did not trip or stumble; he insists that black thing pushed him down the stairs.'

The woman's story had ended, but we were all still digesting its import. Silence hung over the place as I pondered over every aspect of the episode involving her grandson.

Then I asked, 'What do you know about the history of the house?'

'Not much,' Saraswati replied. 'In fact, we aren't the first occupants of this house. Before we moved in, the Dutta family used to live here.'

'They moved out?'

The woman nodded. 'They confided later that they had been through similar experiences here. Of course, they hadn't shared this information before handing the property over. The stories emerged later. It seems they would also hear footsteps on the upper floor, along with wails and laughter and even someone whistling. They experienced more, like someone knocking on the door in the middle of the night. Once, something like a pebble was thrown at their window. The glass windowpane was smashed, but they could not find the pebble or whatever had been thrown.'

Even as I listened to the woman, I realized that this was going to be a unique case. Everything pointed to some malevolent entity which wasn't shy about manifesting itself.

Saraswati continued, 'One evening, when the Duttas were eating at a table that used to stand in this very hall, something terrifying happened.'

'What was it?'

'They felt as if someone was sitting with them at the table. They heard the sounds of chewing, chomping and munching. They all stopped eating, but the sounds continued. Then there was a low growling, not unlike a bear's, and all of a sudden, one of the plates was snatched away and flung against the wall where it smashed into pieces. That same week, the Duttas vacated the house and we got it.'

There was that same contemplative silence again and I broke it with another question: 'Have you or the children ever seen anything more substantial in this house? Something that points to the malevolence?'

'There is something else, but I don't know whether I should believe it,' Saraswati said, after some thought. 'The way things are going, my grandchildren might well be inventing a tall tale just to play along, you know?'

'Tell me about it all the same,' I urged.

'Okay, now I have not witnessed this for myself, but my younger grandchildren claim they have seen a woman.'

'What kind of a woman?'

'She is dressed in red, a saree. She comes down that path outside, towards the house, and enters the house. Then she disappears.'

'Do they claim to see her often?'

'My granddaughter has seen the woman on more than one occasion. She does the same thing every time – comes into the house from outside, uses those steps and goes to the terrace.'

'What does she do on the terrace?'

'No one knows,' Saraswati replied. 'We don't go upstairs, as you know.'

'I see. Can I talk to your grandchildren?'

At that, she refused. 'I would request you not to. They are terrified of everything, as it is, and asking them questions about it will only make it worse. They don't even want to come out of their rooms tonight.'

'I can quite understand your point of view,' I said. 'Children should not be exposed to these things any more than we can help. We'll use our own means to investigate. In fact, we should be beginning our investigation now. May we go to the upper floor?'

She nodded. 'The upper floor is all yours. Neither my grandchildren nor I will be disturbing you. Take as much time as you want, but please rid us of this menace.'

I nodded reassuringly and proceeded to the staircase.

As I climbed the stairs for the upper quarters, I was suddenly beset by a much stronger negative vibe than I had experienced earlier. I felt it all around me now, as if something were trying to engulf and smother me or, at the very least, drive me away from the place. As my steps began to falter, Savio came to my aid and held me by the arm. The feeling of being smothered subsided when I reached the upper floor.

The fog around my head began to clear and I could see the layout of the place. I noticed a corridor on one side, flanked by a railing, that provided access to rooms on the other side. I gathered there could be three or four such rooms. Behind us, the stairs continued on their way up, evidently leading to the terrace we had been told about. I decided to explore the rooms first.

By then, darkness had begun to descend. A part of me had been waiting for dusk to set in, as that is the best time to communicate with entities from another realm. In the feeble residual light, I took some pictures of the rooms and sent them to Pooja, hoping she would sense what we could not, as had happened on many previous occasions. I was especially keen on knowing if she could tell us about the woman in red.

While waiting for Pooja to respond, I began to guide the crew to do a recce of the premises. I noticed that the wooden floor made a creaking sound with every step. When we were still, there was a musty silence all around. The light was fading fast, but from what I could still see, it was plain that the family hadn't been using this floor at all. It was bare, with the paint peeling off and the wood rotting. Wherever my gaze travelled, there were signs of neglect. I had the strong feeling that there was something here that defied our normal human senses. And then the chicken-and-egg question arose in my mind: was this place abandoned because spirits inhabited it or did spirits inhabit this place because it had been abandoned?

I was scouring my surroundings, when my eyes were drawn to an object on the floor. I shone my flashlight on it and was unnerved for a moment. It was a stuffed doll, lying prone on the floor in a way that looked odd to me. The rag doll had red hair and was dressed in red and blue. It looked new and there was no dust on it. As it lay there, its large eyes with exaggerated red-thread eyelashes stared back at me. I sent Srijit downstairs to enquire about the doll. Saraswati and the children denied any knowledge of it; in fact, they were sure there was no such doll when she had moved in.

Then Pooja called.

'Did you see anything in the pictures?' I asked.

'Sarbajeet,' she said in a grave voice, which is typical of her when she sees things psychically, 'where exactly are you guys?'

'It's a government house in Bhubaneswar.'

'Abandoned?'

'Practically. A family lives downstairs, but the upper floor is completely bare.'

'All right…,' she said.

I knew that pause. It meant she was going to make some startling pronouncement.

'All right, listen,' she said. 'The thing is, these pictures have something perplexing in them. I enlarged them and studied them. Immediately, there was this choking feeling. As if the air I was breathing had suddenly become dense. Can't explain it.'

'I know the feeling.' I told her, recalling the similar sensation that had assailed me at the entrance of the house and then while climbing the stairs.

'Usually, when we experience such feelings, we proceed with great caution,' Pooja said. 'But as you are still there, I had to explore further. And I saw something.'

'What was that?'

'I saw a woman dressed in red.'

I felt a chill run through me. 'And?'

'She was being strangled,' said Pooja. 'I could not see by whom, but she was in pain. I saw the woman die. I saw her body on the floor. And then I saw a large tree. I suspect the woman was strangled by someone and then buried under that tree. When I saw the tree, everything went still. I am sure the tree is the epicentre of it all.'

Having received that information, I ended the call. I knew Pooja needed to rest after that psychic experience.

I hadn't noticed any tree when we entered the house through its rickety gate, but I hadn't been to the back of the house yet. So I came out of the house, circled the yard and went all the way to the back. What I saw there made me hold my breath.

There was a huge tree right there, probably centuries old, its branches and vines grown so thick that some of them actually penetrated the house's brickwork. A more fanciful way of observing the same scene would have had the onlooker describing the tree as clasping the house in a tight embrace, as if loath to let go, and that description, I felt, was probably not far removed from reality.

I sent a picture of the tree to Pooja. All she wrote back was a 'Yes.'

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By 8 p.m., we were in the thick of the investigation. Savio was manning a full-spectrum GoPro, while Shiva operated a PSB-7.* I had my trusted K2 meter and my gaze was focused on its lights.

Our first destination was the room where I had found the doll. And the response to our entry was just as I had suspected it would be. The moment I approached the area, the lights began to flicker. Now the K2 meter has five EMF zones, from low to high, represented by lights that range between yellow and red. The earth's normal magnetic field keeps the light in the low yellow zone on at all times. A slight variation might be noticed in higher zones due to electrical wiring or Wi-Fi hotspots, but a fluctuation in the absence of any explainable field is a matter of great intrigue.

The electromagnetic field here was so strong that the light had begun to flicker even in the red zone, which is the highest. What kind of presence could it be to produce such a field? Alarmed, I stopped and tried to make sense of the bizarre occurrence.

It was time to begin communication.

Taking a deep breath and making every effort to keep my voice steady, I said, 'Hello. I am Sarbajeet. I can sense your presence here. Would you please let me know who you are?'

For a mere second, the fluctuation of the lights ceased. It was as if whoever was making it fluctuate had paused to think. But then, the lights began to blink again, this time, with renewed vigour.

I tried again, making a conscious effort to be more respectful in my communication, because that is vitally important. We have to be as respectful of the other world as we are of our own. That's the only way we can hope for its entities to be respectful of us as well.

'I have a television show that deals with the entities of the other world,' I said. 'The people living in this house called us and informed us of your presence. Is what they say true?'

I waited again. This time, the silence was prolonged. Then it was broken by the sound of footsteps on the terrace above. But no one was supposed to be there! We looked up, trying to pinpoint the exact location of the footsteps and then retrace those steps on our floor, which was right below the terrace.

'Why did you go to the terrace?' I asked. 'Come back here. All I want to do is chat with you.'

The footsteps continued without a break, as if my words had made no impact.

'I know you can hear me,' I said. 'You must come down and tell me what you want. I am sure I am the first person in a long time who has tried to talk with you directly. Don't you want to use that opportunity?'

Confident that these words would hit home, I waited. The footsteps did slow down for a moment, but started again. Now I must tell you that these were distinct footsteps. An ethereal entity cannot, typically, interact physically with objects, but when it does, it is a clear sign of great residual emotional turmoil. This thing, whatever it was, had

demonstrated that it could physically manipulate its surroundings. To be honest, that, precisely, was at the root of my fears. Such spirits tend to become violent. I also needed to think about the safety of my crew.

For the next thirty minutes or so, this one-way communication went on. I say one way, because though the spirit responded with a slight alteration in the pacing and rhythm of its footsteps, there was no other identifiable response from it. I knew then that I had to up the game.

Going against all instincts of self-preservation, I picked up the doll. It was tantamount to picking up an object from the debris of a radioactive explosion. My colleagues were so tense and nervous, they found it difficult to breathe normally, but I was determined to carry on.

The moment the doll was in my hands, the K2 meter began to light up all the more. The fluctuation was so intense that I checked the doll all over to see if it was fitted with a battery or magnet or had any kind of wiring in it. There was nothing. All it had was stuffing.

I asked, 'Is this doll yours?'

In response, the meter light swung to maximum in the red.

Keeping my feelings in check, I went on, 'Do you want the doll?'

The response was similar to the previous one.

I gathered that the doll was the trigger. I had to be careful now. In paranormal science, a trigger is a material object in our world to which a supernatural entity has an attachment to even after its physical demise. Using the trigger in the right manner can help you control the entity. But it has to be done carefully. If the situation gets out of hand, the entity might manifest unpredictable behaviour and cause irrevocable harm.

I decided to take the risk. Holding the doll aloft, I told the entity point blank, 'Okay, so here's the deal: I am going to take the doll with me. I dare you to stop me.'

I waited for a few moments with bated breath, careful to monitor any response I might receive from the entity. Then I raised the doll up in the air and flung it into a corner of the room. There was darkness all around us, but that was the darkest corner. The doll hit the floor with a dull thud.

We waited for several minutes, anticipating some kind of retaliation. From the expression on the faces of my crew members, it was quite apparent that they deemed this action of mine foolhardy in the extreme, but they chose not to voice their opinions.

Nothing happened though.

Then all of a sudden, the footsteps on the terrace were back. This time, they seemed to be running away from us. We stared up, trying to gauge and follow their direction. It led us out of the room and into the adjoining one.

It was then that the retaliation began.

Srijit, who was behind me, suddenly gasped. He looked as if he was

going to be sick. His body was bent over and he was clutching his throat. All of a sudden, he was assailed by a bout of violent coughing. Before I could reach him, he tottered and fell. What he did next was bewildering, to say the least. Clutching his throat and still coughing, he managed to say, 'Choking… Suffocated…'

I realized it was the same choking sensation that Pooja and I had experienced earlier.

I don't know what sentiment surged within me in that instant; I think it was rage. I rushed up to the spot where we had last heard the footsteps, looked straight up at the ceiling and said, 'Look, whoever you are, I won't allow you to hurt my men or this family which has called us here to seek our protection. Whatever you want to do, I am right here. Come here and deal with me.'

---

I couldn't tell if my outburst had had any immediate effect. At least, nothing that was apparent. The footsteps, however, retreated.

After another long, silent pause, I asked again, 'Are you still there?'

Almost immediately, the lights went full throttle on the K2 meter.

'Okay, okay. Let's be decent with each other,' I said. 'Do it the way you want to. I will ask you questions from here and you can answer them in the manner you choose. I will play, the way you want me to. Please let me know more about you. Are you male?'

There was nothing on the meter for a minute.

'Female?'

The lights lit up till the red zone.

'Are you the one who choked my crew member?'

Again, a full sweep of the lights. A response so swift, it was terrifying. It was as if it were mocking me.

'Why did you do that?'

I realized this question could not be answered on the meter; it had emerged spontaneously. There was, however, a response; only, it wasn't the one any of us had anticipated.

There was a full-length wooden wardrobe in the room. It stood at the other end of the room, shrouded in darkness, and we would never have paid any heed to it under normal circumstances. But just then, we heard a sound, as if someone was knocking on the door of the cupboard – from inside. It was unbelievable, but there it was – a regular tap-tap-tap! I moved closer to investigate. And, indeed, the knocking was coming from inside, as if someone were trapped in there and wanted to be let out. In fact, as we stood there, absolutely still, we saw the cupboard's wooden door move slightly with every tap.

I asked Savio, who was closest to the cupboard, to open it. At first, he

would not budge or was probably reluctant to approach the cupboard. But he did heed my second request and proceeded to open the wardrobe. I noticed his hand trembling as he held it out to open the cupboard door. For a moment, I even expected him to give up and back out. But then he seized the door by its handle and pulled it open… There was nothing inside the wardrobe, not even a stitch of cloth.

And yet, we had all heard the knocking and seen the movement of the door with every knock.

This hide-and-seek game would go on for a long time.

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We walked through every room, recording as much audio and visual proof as we could. The footsteps had subsided after the wardrobe incident, but now and then, the silence would be shattered by some phantom noise. We'd constantly feel as if something were following us, but on turning around, we'd find nothing. At one point, there was a thud outside the room we were in, but again, when we went out and had a look, there was no one there.

When it was nearing midnight, Savio told me that we had probably made a mistake. According to him, we should either have visited on a full-moon night or a new-moon night, because that is when paranormal activities are at their zenith. On this particular night, there was just a gibbous moon in the sky. I managed to convince him that since we had made the trip, the best we could do was gather enough footage for an episode for our television show.

I could sense that all three of my team members were quite shaken by whatever had transpired till then. Realizing that the negative vibes in the room were beginning to affect Srijit the most, I decided to send him away to shoot outside. I advised him to keep his eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary. He looked at me fearfully, but I knew he would be on a safer mission outside. I was convinced by then that the locus of the activities was inside the house – on this very floor and on the terrace. That turned out to be a mistake on my part, because I had failed to account for the presence of the giant tree in the yard.

The rest of us continued to monitor the house, which was again going through one of its silent spells.

But about fifteen minutes later, we heard a loud yell from Srijit that rang out in the darkness: '*Bachao! Bachao!* Help! Help!'

His voice was laced with terror, as if he had been attacked and was in mortal danger.

I shot out of the room and was halfway down the stairs, before I realized that his voice was coming from another room on the first floor itself. I quickly turned towards the room and what I saw in there was a

manifestation of the paranormal that other investigators would willingly give an arm and a leg for.

The room was a small one, submerged in semi-darkness. Srijit seemed to be frozen in a weird standing posture, with one of his legs jutting out. His face was contorted, as though he were in terrible agony.

'I feel… I feel as if something is grasping my leg. I just cannot move it…,' he managed to say.

The first thought that occurred to me was that his foot might have got caught in a loose wire. I shone the flashlight on it instantly, but there was nothing of the sort. It was just his foot, now suspended in mid-air, his leg stretched out at an awkward, impossible angle. I was seized by panic, fearing that his leg might have fractured.

On an impulse, I tried shaking Srijit out of his strange stance. I asked him to place his foot down on the floor, but it was obvious that he couldn't. Not knowing what to do, I tried shaking him loose from the rigidity of his position, trying, somehow, to make him put his foot back on the floor. The other guys in the team came in too and we tried moving Srijit, but the three of us together could not release him from that locked position. It was as if some invisible force was trying to pull him away.

In desperation, one of us tried to pull at him too hard, but it was the wrong strategy. Unable to bear the brunt of conflicting forces from both sides, Srijit fell, landing in the adjoining room beyond, which had apparently been a kitchen some time in the past. For a moment, we lost sight of him as he fell. My hair stands on end even now, as I try to imagine what kind of power we might have been wrestling with in our bid to rescue our friend and colleague. It is in the rarest of circumstances that the ethereal world manifests itself in such a strong physical fashion, but here it was and I was witnessing it for myself.

All of us rushed into the kitchen. We found Srijit sitting on the floor, his eyes bulging with terror, his shirt sticking to his sweating body and his breath laborious, as if he were trying to restart his lungs. Whatever had been pulling him seemed to have let go.

But the next moment, his face contorted sharply with pain. Still grimacing, he raised the hem of his pants and what we saw defied explanation.

On the skin near Srijit's ankle, at the very spot where he had felt the unnatural tugging on his leg, were five black marks, like the impressions of five fingers.

Fascinated by what I beheld, I tried feeling those marks with my fingertips to find out if they were flat on the skin or raised, like scars. But the moment I did, Srijit screamed in pain. Unable to hear him scream, I withdrew my hand abruptly.

Despite everything that had happened so far, I had the presence of

mind to take a picture of the five black marks on my teammate's leg. Till today, I carry it with me as evidence of that terrifying night.

---

There was one more blood-curdling incident awaiting us at the Bhubaneswar government house that night. It was to take place around 3 a.m., when we had decided to take a short break. We had collected enough footage for the television episode by now. We had also gathered enough material to enable us to hold a discussion with the current resident of the house and explain what was happening here. But since the location was highly active, I was still hankering to record a few more scenes.

We entered the room containing the cupboard and sat on whatever we could find. This had been the room with the least activity, according to our readings. I asked Savio to keep the night-vision camera on and instructed the team to sit motionless and silent for the next ten minutes so that they could observe what was going on. The silence was necessary to purge any kind of hostile thoughts that might have invaded us.

Shiva took a seat next to the cupboard whose door was ajar now; it looked like any other cupboard that had seen better
days. The room itself appeared to be quite innocuous. We sat in that manner for about fifteen minutes. Then Shiva, who had a view of the corridor outside, froze. Stretching out his arm, he gestured to the rest of us to gather around him. Without a word, we went and stood behind him. And then it happened, right in front of us.

Out there in the corridor, right outside the door to the room where Srijit had been 'ankled', we saw something materializing. It was pitch dark now and there wasn't even an LED on in any of our devices. But a moonbeam was filtering in through a ventilator near the ceiling. Cutting through that moonbeam, like black smoke, was something dark and sinister. I could clearly see it gathering, coming together and coalescing, then trying to morph into some kind of material mass. It was happening right there, about 15 feet from where we were.

The night-vision camera was running. Savio turned it to get a better view.

I stepped up. I knew the moment had come. I could feel my own cold breath gathering in my lungs.

'Hello, there!' I said as respectfully as I could.

The thing continued to materialize.

'You have had a lot of fun with us tonight,' I went on. 'I see you now.' I could actually feel the tremor in my voice, but I had to brazen it out. 'I dare you to manifest closer to me, right here.'

At that point, we were all assailed by a pungent smell. It wasn't merely

the kind of stench that emanates from rotting food; it was much more intense, invading my nostrils and assaulting my olfactory nerves. It was so nauseating that I had to cover my nose.

That was all the response the thing gave us. The next moment, the smell had vanished and the smoke was dissipating. Whatever it was that had been forming had simply vanished into thin air.

To this day, I wonder if I did the right thing by challenging the spirit. Maybe, she was a frightened spirit, after all, and my standing up to her had frightened her still more.

We decided to pack up after that. There was nothing more to be done; it seemed like the most sensible thing to do.

I went through the rooms, once again, to make sure that I hadn't left anything behind. That was when I saw the doll again. It was back on the floor in the middle of the room. And it was in the same prone position I had found it in the first time, its huge eyes still staring at me.

We cleared out from the government house at six the next morning. Saraswati had woken up by then. I did not share everything we had seen with her, but I did confirm with her that there was definitely something out of the ordinary in the house and that I had performed a cleansing ritual to banish the malevolent influence. I urged her to get back to me if things took a turn for the worse. She never did and I rest happy in the thought that I managed to tame the rancour of the spirit in some manner.

The morning following the investigation, the team that had accompanied me failed to turn up at the studio. I called them up to find out what the matter was. All three of them gave me the same explanation: all had had the same nightmare where they saw themselves running along the halls of the government house and being choked to death and thrown off the terrace to the foot of the gnarled tree in the yard. The nightmare could well have been the outcome of their overwrought minds, taxed to their limits by the previous night's experience, I reasoned. But the fact that all three men saw the same thing, down to the last detail, suggests something that lies beyond normal human comprehension. I advised them to have a saltwater bath to purge any traces of malevolence and urged them to take a short break.

When we met in the editing room on the third day, we had no idea that a final shock awaited us. We were meticulously going through the footage, not really sure if we wanted to put everything out in public, because even seeing it on film was quite a nerve-wracking experience.

We came to the last few seconds of the footage, right before the spirit had tried to manifest, and found something we hadn't seen earlier. Though night-vision cameras don't have a flash, this part of the footage was punctuated by intermittent flashes of light. There was nothing that could explain those flashes.

Then there was a moment, just before Shiva beckoned us, when he had turned his head slightly towards the cupboard. While the movement was almost imperceptible, what was noteworthy was his puzzled frown, as if something he had seen was eluding him. In the midst of all the terrifying developments that had taken place, this was evidently so inconsequential an occurrence that it had escaped everyone's attention, even Shiva's. But now, going through the footage, we realized what had caused his bemused expression. At the precise moment that expression appeared on his face, the unexplained flash on the night-vision camera showed us a dark substance leaving the cupboard.

In retrospect, I feel this is what must have happened: Shiva's peripheral vision had captured the dark substance, but while his subconscious mind had registered it, his conscious mind had glossed over it at that time, taking note of it only when it began to materialize in the corridor in front of him.

And there it was! The spirit had been right there with us, lurking in the cupboard, sharing the break we had been taking. That was probably when she had decided to make her presence felt, to make it clear we were encroaching on what she had staked out as her territory!

When I took up this case, I had already gained much experience from working on several paranormal investigations and had even spent time in some of the most haunted locations in the country. But they had not prepared me for the developments that would unfold in the Bhubaneswar government house. They were unprecedented and will always stand apart. In fact, had I not been through the experience myself, I would never have believed that the paranormal could manifest itself in such physical ways. Even today, I am hard put to accept that it happened at all.

* All names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals.

* Full spectrum GoPro is a GoPro camera that is customized to allow all light frequencies. This enables inspection of a wider range of spectrum, including the range in which the parapsychological dimension is believed to exist.

* The EMF pump is an electromagnetic-frequency pump. The device contains a magnet that is made to rotate at high speed. The rotation of the magnet produces an electromagnetic field in the surrounding area. Paranormal investigators believe this amplified electromagnetic field helps entities to materialize.

* PIR sensor (Passive Infrared sensor) is a device with light indicators that light up when there is a movement within its range.

* Electronic Detection and Investigation device. This is an all-in-one device that measures the electromagnetic field, the temperature, auditory disturbances, geometer and frequencies, among others.

* PSB-7 scans FM or AM frequencies at a desirable and controllable speed. It scans frequencies in forward or reverse mode. As it scans, it produces a white noise which the spirit uses to communicate. It is generally used in the reverse mode.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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– Sarbajeet Mohanty and Neil D'Silva

**Sarbajeet Mohanty**, a certified paranormal investigator from the Institute of Metaphysical Humanistic Science (Florida), a certified demonologist from the New Life Ministry Church School (Ohio) and a reverend at the Universal Church (Florida), has been exploring the unknown for seven years now. He co-founded the Parapsychology and Investigations Research Society (PAIRS), which has conducted paranormal expeditions in around 150 locations in India. He was the host of Kalinga TV's paranormal show *Mana Ki Na Mana*.

**Neil D'Silva** is an author and screenwriter who works primarily in the horror genre. With ten books and three screen adaptation deals under his belt, he has been listed among the top Indian horror authors to read by UK's DESIblitz. D'Silva won the Indian Blogger Award for short stories in 2017. He gave a TEDx talk in 2018 on 'The Art of Writing a Bestseller'. He speaks at various literary forums and festivals about his works and writing in general.

THE SPIRITS TALK TO ME

TRUE ACCOUNTS OF PARANORMAL INVESTIGATIONS

**'It's something in your line of work,' he said hurriedly. 'It's something… otherworldly. Please come. There is no time to lose.'**

A forest lures men to their doom, invisible hands smash crockery in a time-worn house, machines turn malevolent in an old factory, phantom laughter, whispers from nowhere, shadows that trail people – these are just some of the experiences that Sarbajeet Mohanty, paranormal investigator and founder of the Parapsychology and Investigations Research Society, confronts daily on the job.

Tracking Sarbajeet and his team as they probe harrowing supernatural happenings across the country, these ten suspenseful tales move from a courthouse occupied by an insidious presence to a hellish riverbank where battles from the ancient Kalinga War continue to play out, to a film studio in Mumbai where a sordid past waits to be unearthed. Along the way, readers get a rare peek into the distinctive investigative methods used by the team to detect mysterious forces that exist in parallel realms.

Narrated by veteran horror writer Neil D'Silva in atmospheric prose, the chilling accounts in The Spirits Talk to Me are spine-tingling and guaranteed to make you lose sleep.

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